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What does it mean to be a transnational student today? An exploratory research with Iranian students at the University of Padua

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*A quella bambina curiosa, innamorata del mondo,
che non ha mai smesso di sognare*

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Introduction

International student mobility is a phenomenon that dates back to the first learning institutions in the world. However, over the last decades, international mobility has undergone some considerable changes, and in turn, has shaped student mobility in today's world. The rapid increase in the number of students circulating globally is one of the most striking trends, with figures reaching over 6 million in 2021 (UIS, 2023). Many studies have been conducted on the geopolitical and economic dimensions, as well as the geographical trends and patterns of mobility, and the national and institutional policies on enrollment. Meanwhile, the individual dimension, the everyday practices of these peculiar migration experiences, the "micro" level of enquiry, has received limited scholarly attention, often considered mere academic experiences, disregarding the element of immigration in a different country.

This thesis argues that student migration extends beyond education and academic achievement; it involves navigating a complex emotional journey marked by hope, uncertainty, and transformation (Soong, 2015), confronting legal and bureaucratic systems that often reproduce inequality, constantly shifting between different cultural codes and social norms, while attempting to balance all the different challenges and still fulfil the social and academic expectations placed upon them, both by themselves and by others. The research draws on the theoretical framework of transnationalism to interpret migrating students as social actors embedded in multiple, overlapping fields that span both home and host countries.

Originally conceptualised as a response to methodological nationalism, transnationalism emerged in the social sciences in the early 1990s as a framework to understand the lives of migrants who sustain social relations and interactions across the borders of nation-states (Glick Schiller et al., 1992). Contemporary interpretations focus more closely on the dialectical relationship between structural conditions and the situational agency of the actors (Lacroix, 2014) as well as the contingent and stratified nature of transnational practices, shaped by disparities in access and involvement. By using this lens, the research explores how participants make sense of their experience as transnational students and renegotiate their sense of agency in a social context that spans beyond a single locality. Rather than viewing migration as a singular event, this approach highlights the continuous and situated work of meaning-making, resilience, and adaptation in the participants' journeys.

This framework is applied to the analysis of the experiences of student mobility of young Iranians who moved to Italy to attend the University of Padova. These are explored using dialogical interviews (La Mendola, 2009), a method particularly suited to capturing the formation and flow of life, that privileges participants' voices and interpretations, aiming to let the meanings they associated with their experiences emerge from their narratives. The study aims to offer a closer reading of the everyday practices, from securing housing and dealing with bureaucracy to forming friendships and connecting through digital technologies, that collectively shape what it means to live as a transnational student today.

The first chapter examines the development of transnationalism, in its application to migration studies. It begins by tracing its emergence in the seminal work of Glick Shiller et al. (1992) as a critique of methodological nationalism and nation-bound conceptualisations of migrations. The chapter then critically engages with the debates around the novelty and scope of transnationalism. Finally, it presents the most recent conceptualisations that view transnationalism as shaped by both its structural underpinnings and the situated agency of individuals, which is affected by intersecting factors like gender and class. The chapter ultimately positions transnationalism as a critical lens through which to interpret international student mobility.

The second chapter presents the historical and sociopolitical context necessary to understand the participants' background. Firstly, it offers a concise yet comprehensive analysis of the most significant events in Iran's history, spanning from the reign of the last Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, to the most notable occurrences of the current year. The chapter then engages in a discussion of the emergence and consolidation of the social movement "Woman, Life, Freedom", considering its effect and consequences on Iran's society. Lastly, it outlines the formation and characteristics of the Iranian diaspora, offering insight into the transnational trajectories that shape the experiences of the study's participants.

The third chapter is dedicated to the empirical research, beginning with a discussion of the methodological approach adopted in the study. It outlines the use of qualitative methods, specifically dialogical interviews, and reflects on the research design and the researcher's positionality. The chapter then presents the key findings through a thematic analysis drawing directly from the theoretical framework introduced in Chapter One, aiming to answer the central research question: What does it mean to be a transnational student today?

Chapter One: Transnational Migrations

1.1 Transnationalism

Now, a new kind of migrating population is emerging, composed of those whose networks, activities and patterns of life encompass both their host and home societies. Their lives cut across national boundaries and bring two societies into a single social field. In this book we argue that a new conceptualization is needed in order to come to terms with the experience and consciousness of this new migrant population. (Glick Shiller et al., 1992, p. 1)

The demand expressed by these cultural anthropologists to reconceptualise international migration through a new lens reflects a broader sentiment shared by social scientists at the end of the 20th century, who sought to analyse the effects and transformations brought about by globalisation. Economic, social and political challenges emerged from technological advancements, cultural exchanges and the unprecedented scale of people, commodities, and information travelling across national borders. The academic and political worlds debated nation-states' relevance and future in a globalised world, where societies were becoming increasingly interconnected, with a growing interest in their integration into a global structure. Immanuel Wallerstein (1974) theorised the presence of unequal economic and political relations between the peripheries and the centre of the world, where nation-states are merely instruments of a capitalistic mechanism of competition and power, which he named the World System. The disparity in economic relations affects the international division of labour, which drives migration patterns, as wealthy countries import low-cost labour from the peripheries. Harvey (1990) stated how the pursuit of capital growth and consumption in the postmodern socio-political order altered production, communication and transportation dynamics, resulting in what he referred to as “time-space compression”. He argued that the capitalist imperative to overcome spatial and temporal barriers accelerated the experience of time and diminished the significance of geographical distance. However, time-space compression operates unevenly across different regions and social classes, reinforcing inequalities and leading to economic instability (Harvey, 1989). Harvey’s theorisation leads the discussion towards the cultural aspects of globalisation. Nations are not simply geopolitical entities; they are socially constructed through shared values and symbols, collectivities held together by the ability of its members to imagine themselves as part of a community, whether residing within the same political borders or dispersed across different countries (Anderson, 1983). Owing to media massification and mass migration,

imagination became a collective and social practice; more people could envision different lives in new locations, developing migration aspirations while new technologies allowed them to maintain connections to their home country (Appadurai, 1996).

These prominent contributions set the groundwork for developing new theoretical frameworks to analyse economic forces, cultural dynamics and social relations from a global perspective. Sociologists and anthropologists who analysed migrations in the newly globalised world recognised how a series of economic and socio-political transformations distinguished these from previous migration processes (Capello et al., 2014). The concept of deterritorialisation became prominent: the high level of mobility and the establishment of cultural and political relationships among two or more societies challenged the idea of national identity, calling into question the structure and the sovereignty of the Nation-state. In alignment with this general vision, Glick Shiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton introduced a new conceptualisation in international migration studies in 1992. They claimed that social sciences had until then analysed the social relations of immigrant populations through theories that considered each society to have its own distinct and separate culture, like some “bounded entity” (Glick Shiller et al., 1992, p. 6). And that world system theorists had looked at migrants only as part of the international labour market, passing over the cultural dimension of their experience and social relations patterns (Glick Shiller et al., 1992). On this account, they proposed a new framework called Transnationalism. From this perspective, migration experiences are analysed as not tied to a singular local context. The social system migrants belong to is constituted of networks based in multiple territories. The practices and interactions they engage in come about across nations’ borders, maintaining and reinforcing the connections between different societies. Migrants’ lives and experiences are characterised by a continuity of presence and participation in their host and home country. They manage simultaneous activities and relationships in multiple national contexts, including familial duties, economic contributions and political mobilisation. This supports the idea of fluid identities, multifaceted and continuously reshaped by their experiences, drawing from multiple cultural influences.

The manipulation of their identities is considered an active process crucial to opposing and adapting to the subordinate conditions they are forced to live in by the global capitalist system (Glick Shiller et al., 1992). Indeed, the authors claim that transnationalism is a product of world capitalism, resulting in a different phenomenon from past migrations. Rejecting an assimilationist model, the authors theorise the concept of *transnational social*

fields. This refers to the multi-sited and dynamic networks of social practices and relationships through which material and cultural resources are exchanged, and individual and collective bonds are established. Therefore, they challenge the mainstream understanding of migration patterns revolving around the nation-state as the sole unit of analysis, which they refer to as methodological nationalism. Transnationalism frames the migration dynamics in a global prospect, which views the world as a “single social and economic system” (Glick Shiller et al., 1992, p.19), considering the influence of global power relations and status differentiations on migrants’ experiences. Nonetheless, it does not overlook the ongoing relevance of nation-states. The nation-states’ significance within larger global processes is considered in terms of their influence on the construction of individual identities and their role in regulating social, economic and legal policies. While engaging in transnational practices, migrants remain tied to the national framework when it comes to citizenship and legal rights, political participation and voting, labour policies and economic regulations.

This article laid the foundation for their seminal work *Nation Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-States*, published in 1994, which examines three case study of migration between the Caribbeans and the Philippines and the United States. This work marked the beginning of the development of the concept in contemporary Migration Studies and received significant recognition. However, it was not immune to criticism. Kivisto (2001) challenged the dismissal of assimilation theory and the assumption of a generalised migrant experience involving cross-border activities and connections to multiple national contexts. He argued this perspective does not account for immigrants who have limited, if not absent, connections to their home country and pursue integration into the host society. Furthermore, he disputed the idea of Transnationalism as a completely new migratory phenomenon produced by the global capitalist system, which immigrants actively resist by manipulating their identities. Historically, nineteenth-century migrations were also largely shaped by the capitalist labour market, and immigrants’ responses to this system were varied but predominantly consisted of attempts to integrate themselves into it (Kivisto, 2001).

The issue regarding the novelty of this phenomenon and how it differs from other international, postnational, supranational or diasporic practices was at the core of the emergent narratives on transnational migrations. Within a line of study that is more explicitly sociological, Portes et al. (1999) detect the field’s fragmentation and propose a clearer

definition of Transnationalism and guidelines to employ the concept in empirical research. They state that it is necessary to delimit the scope of the term Transnationalism to “occupations and activities that require regular and sustained social contacts over time across national borders for their implementation” (Portes et al., 1999, p. 219). This definition anchors the difference between past migratory phenomena and transnational migrations in the elevated concentration of cross-border connections and their stability over time. The preconditions that made these possible are identified in technological advancements, especially the time-space compressing technologies such as “instantaneous communication and easy personal travel” (Portes et al., 1999, p.227). The authors acknowledged the existence of precedent economic and political transnational activities. Still, they highlighted how these were mostly exceptions, comprised mainly of an élite group of merchants and traders and lacked regularity and mass involvement. Labour migrations at the turn of the twentieth century were perhaps the closest to contemporary transnational activities for their massive scale and routinised nature. Yet, the latter entails a new ensemble of strategies and actions employed by people in disadvantaged conditions in reaction to a new global economy (Portes et al., 1999).

In contrast to the first anthropological studies, which emphasised the novelty of this phenomenon, Portes highlights the continuity with the past through a comparative historical analysis. This initiates a shift from an early phase of enthusiasm to a more compelled effort in the analysis of the various factors that transnationalism comprises. Drawing from Guarnizo’s (1997) categorisation of transnational phenomena into “transnationalism from below” and “transnationalism from above, ” Portes et al. (1999) distinguish between different types of transnational activities. These include those conducted by powerful institutions and actors, such as wealthy entrepreneurs, multinational corporations, and government functionaries, as well as grassroots initiatives enacted by immigrants. Grassroots transnationalism is the focus of both these anthropological and sociological studies, which agree on the importance of examining migrants’ histories and everyday practices to understand the effects and underpinnings of transnationalism. Portes et al. (1999) identify the individuals and their support networks as the appropriate unit of analysis, considering the role played by communities and more institutionalised actors as the object of further and more complex analyses.

Opposing this argument, Kivisto (2001) stated the importance of taking into consideration the structures and institutions within which the lives of individuals and their families come

about. Similarly, Faist (2000) challenged Portes' approach and argued for a more comprehensive interpretation of transnational processes, conjugating the analyses of transnationalism "from below" and "from above".

Transnational social spaces are constituted by the various forms of resources or capital of spatially mobile and immobile persons, on the one hand, and the regulations imposed by nation-states and various other opportunities and constraints, on the other; for example, state-controlled immigration and refugee policies, and institutions in ethnic communities. (Faist, 2000, p. 192)

Furthermore, Faist (2000) stated how transnational social spaces are defined and delimited by relationships between the government and civil society of the immigration state and those of the emigration state, as well as between these and the transnational groups (i.e. migrants, refugees, religious or ethnic minorities). He stressed the difference between global processes that occur "in a world context above and below states" and transnational processes that are extensively tied to the national contexts, contrasting earlier conceptualisation of deterritorialised communities, and directly involve institutional actors (Faist, 2000, p. 192). These are essential for the emergence of transnational social space, stated Faist, highlighting how the technological advancements might have accelerated the process but were insufficient for developing transnational connections. Pre-existing economic, political and cultural linkages between the country of origin and the country of immigration catalyse the formation of transnational communities that, in some cases, extend beyond the first generations of migrants, namely Diasporas (Faist, 2000).

In the early 2000s, economic and institutional aspects gained more attention, and scholars studied the role and importance of remittances (Itzigsohn, 2000), entrepreneurship among diasporic communities, transnational labour markets as well as transnational citizenship (Faist, 2000; Levitt and Glick Shiller, 2004) and social movements. Levitt and Glick Shiller (2004) argued that citizenship and state membership extend beyond the legal definitions: migrants participate politically even when the state does not recognise them as citizens, they claim rights, engage in social movement and contribute to shaping the socio-political landscapes of the country they live in. However, they are exposed to different political systems and thus transfer ideas, objectives and interpretations across borders, influencing the governance and the civil society of both sending and receiving states (Levitt and Glick Shiller, 2004). Faist (2000) explored the implications of Transnationalism on the dimensions of citizenship and membership. These are part of a threefold analysis of immigrant adaptation theories: assimilation theories, ethnic pluralism and "border-crossing expansion of social space" (Faist, p. 201). He critiqued the formers as "container concepts" that view

citizenship as merely a legal and nation-bound concept and culture as a fixed and static “baggage”, strictly territorial. He argued for a broader perspective on membership and culture, named *transnational syncretism*, a blending of different cultural, social and political elements that emerge from transnational ties and result in hybrid identities and political and social engagement across borders (Faist, 2000, p. 211-216). Migrants’ sense of belonging thus encompasses more than one nation-state, making the case for dual nationality and dual-state memberships (Faist, p. 209).

On a contrary note, Kivisto (2001) defended the assimilation theory, drawing from newer theorisations that aimed to correct the shortcomings of the older versions. The melting-pot model is abandoned, and great relevance is given to acculturation and supporting the perspective of ethnic retention persistence over several generations. On these new premises, he argued that transnationalism should be considered one of the possible forms of assimilation (Kivisto, 2001). The actions and efforts to maintain transnational ties and connections are considered a parallel phenomenon to acculturation. The former, stated Kivisto (2001), is a difficult process of social construction that requires energy, time, and access to resources, thus forcing immigrants to decide every day if investing their social, cultural and economic capital solely on their transnational networks or focusing their energies to engage with the civic society of the host country. Moreover, he stressed the ongoing importance of “place” to the extent that, even if engaging in transnational activities and mobility, most immigrants still live predominantly in one place, the host country, and, as time progresses, the issues linked to it will take priority over those concerning their homeland (Kivisto, 2001).

The relationships between transnational immigrants and the receiving state, as well as the institutional and political importance of Nation-States, were at the centre of Waldinger & Fitzgerald’s (2004) critique of Transnationalism. Although they recognised the value of this innovative concept, they claimed it was based on an idealised representation of borderless migration and powerless states. First, they argued that states remained the primary actors in shaping the migration processes. From border controls and visa policies to immigration and deportation laws, the national governments heavily regulate physical mobility. Remittances, dual citizenship and transnational labour markets depend on the legal frameworks of the sending and receiving countries. Citizenship laws, as well as legal and economic barriers, structure immigrants’ lives, defining access to resources such as work permits, education, and social services. Diasporic political participation is regulated by national states, some of

which allow and encourage it, while others actively suppress it to prevent dissent and opposition from proliferating (Waldinger & Fitzgerald, 2004). Secondly, they stated that transnationalism is not as widespread or universal as the first researchers suggested; it's a highly selective phenomenon. Immigrants' experiences depend on their economic status, legal position and social networks. Thus, transnational migration is an unevenly distributed opportunity more than an inevitable experience for all migrants, and those who establish themselves in a new country are subjected to economic and social pressure to integrate into the host society (Waldinger & Fitzgerald, 2004). Ultimately, they call for more nuanced research that balances the recognition of transnational connections with an acknowledgement of state control and structural inequalities.

As reported in Levitt & Jaworsky (2007), Waldinger & Fitzgerald (2004) were not the only ones who critiqued the first conceptualisation as a broad generalisation that encompassed too many distinct phenomena within a single category, and others questioned the scope and importance of a theorisation that stemmed mainly from case studies. While the number of immigrants that actually engage in transnational activities with regularity may be smaller than predicted, there is a great number of people who participate in "occasional, informal transnational activities, including social, cultural, and religious practices, in response to elections, economic downturns, life-cycle events, and climatic disasters" (Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007). In alignment with this discussion, a great effort has been made in categorising and classifying the various activities that can fall under the category of transnationalism, as well as in deconstructing the concept itself. Portes et al. (1999) differentiate between economic, political, and sociocultural transnationalism, while Itzigsohn et al. (1999) divide the sociocultural dimension into processes related to civil society and cultural and identity processes. Itzigsohn et al. (1999) further distinguish between "narrow" and "broad" transnationalism, the former being a more institutionalised and regular activity, while the latter comprises occasional and sporadic movements. Faist (2000) puts forward a typology based on the social group involved and the type of relationship that binds it together. He differentiates between small groups connected by family and emotional ties, economic circuits, and larger communities characterised by a common identity. Vertovec (1999; 2009) claimed that the meaning of transnationalism is grounded in six theoretical premises: social morphology, type of consciousness, mode of cultural reproduction, avenue of capital, site of political engagement, and (re)construction of 'place' or locality.

In the following years, the effort to achieve terminological and conceptual clarity leads to a greater regard for the individual actor and his life trajectory and for the intersection of transnational ways of life with other individual characteristics, like gender, class, and social capital. Grillo (2007) highlighted the inability of the concept of transnationalism to sufficiently account for the positioning of the actors involved, especially in terms of gender, ethnic origin and social class. He introduced the concept of intersectionality, referring to the idea that individuals' experiences are shaped by multiple, overlapping social categories and identities, such as gender, age, class, ethnicity, and immigration status, and these categories do not operate independently of each other. Rather, they intersect and interact, shaping the experiences of migrants. Mazzucato (2008) explored the situational aspect of migrant engagement with their countries of origin, stating how migrants' involvement in transnational activities varies according to specific circumstances such as personal goals, life stages, and changing external factors. Migration processes cannot be solely explained by external structural factors; personal decisions and agency play a crucial role, resulting in varying levels of involvement at different stages of life and a flexible engagement in transnational practices (Mazzucato, 2008). Boccagni (2012) emphasised that migrants are active agents in shaping their transnational practices, while external structural factors influence their experiences and opportunities, migrants themselves play a central role in determining how and when they engage in transnational activities.

Rather than as something out there, the transnational should be understood as a matter of situated attributes that may emerge, to different degrees and under distinct circumstances, in migrants' lives and in migration-related social formations. (Boccagni, 2012, p. 128)

Boccagni (2012) critiqued previous perspectives which depicted transnationalism as a structural and deterministic process shaped by global economic forces and state policies, and he offered an alternative where transnationalism is seen as a negotiated practice. Transnationalism is, therefore, understood as the result of the dialectical relationship between structural conditions and the situational agency of the actors (Lacroix, 2014).

Aligning with this renewed perspective on transnationalism, return migration became an increasingly relevant topic. Carling & Erdal (2014) argued that return migration and transnational migrations are deeply connected phenomena, challenging the conventional view that saw return migration as the end of transnational engagement. They argued for a more fluid and cyclic understanding of migrants' experiences, where ties and connections persist during the periods when migrants travel back to their origin country. Furthermore,

they highlighted the variety of return experiences and stated that these could be affected by factors such as the duration of time spent abroad, the strength of transnational networks, individual aspirations, and conditions in both the host and home countries (Carling & Erdal, 2014). Tedeschi et al. (2022) report return migration as a promising field of research and suggest future developments regarding the reintegration process in the former country of origin and the influence telecommunications could have on the aspirations to return.

Indeed, in the last two decades, the widespread of digital technologies, social media and virtual realities transformed almost every aspect of life, and many scholars have started analysing how these advancements could influence transnational connections and mobility. Starikov et al. (2018) explored the role of technologies in shaping transnational migration experiences and argued the transformative potential of digital spaces. They coined the term “digital transnationalism” and stated the emergence of a new phenomenon, a new form of transnationalism. Social media platforms and virtual spaces constitute entirely new ways of creating and maintaining connections with the homeland, participating in political discussions and elections, as well as community-building initiatives. The authors discussed how digital networks can help reduce the effects of isolation in the host countries and maintain traditional, religious and linguistic knowledge. However, concern is expressed towards the possibility of exploitation of these instruments by extremist and terroristic organisations that target migrant communities and ethnic minorities with the intent to endanger or recruit vulnerable individuals (Starikov et al., 2018). They urge the necessity of an interdisciplinary, international collaboration between law enforcement agencies, tech and media experts, and academic researchers to identify and counter online threats and radicalisation. New technologies are developing at an exponential rate, and many questions are still unanswered, but the initial excitement and ingenuousness have been slowly replaced by an interest in understanding the consequences and social externalities.

Along with digital transnationalism, the most recent global challenges, such as climate change and the pandemic, have pushed scholars to explore new directions and analyse transnationalism through new lenses. Rising nationalist movements and stricter immigration policies pose questions regarding immobility, migration social protection and the future of transnationalism and globalisation. Furthermore, Tedeschi et al. (2022) claim the necessity to pay more attention to the connection between structural and legal procedures and the everyday lives of transnational migrants, focusing on the practices of adaptation concerning physical bodies. Khosravi (2010), in his autoethnography, reports the importance of the

physical dimension when dealing with the experiences of illegal border-crossing, adaptation to a new society in a host country and even in the attempt to demonstrate one's refugee status. Brown (2017) stated that the physical body is central in processes of adaptation to the host country, affecting identity formation, economic mobility and transnational practices. The author argues that the necessity to resocialise their bodily performances can affect their emotional health and personal safety and reinforce their perception of being "outsiders". Through participant observation and in-depth interviews, Brown (2017) investigates how immigrants perceive their bodies in relation to their new social environments; the study reveals these experiences are sources of frustration, discrimination and alienation.

Over the years, the vast academic production on transnationalism generated critiques of concept stretching, namely the expansion of a concept to encompass more phenomena under its scope, which leads to imprecision and loss of meaning. Nonetheless, many authors sustain that Transnationalism is still a valid analytical and epistemological perspective capable of highlighting a significant characteristic of a wide range of social dynamics. As such, it serves as a useful tool for interpreting large-scale political, economic, and socio-cultural transformations (Dahinden, 2017) and the everyday, individual practices of thousands of migrants.

1.2 Transnational Political Engagement

The concept of political transnationalism is highly complex and encompasses a great variety of phenomena. Portes et al. (1999, p. 221) defined it as "the political activities of party of officials, government functionaries, or community leaders whose main goals are the achievement of political power and influence in the sending or receiving countries". Vertovec (1999) discussed it as one of the key dimensions of transnationalism, highlighting how migrants' organisations and associations can influence government policies and political parties in both the host and the home country. He pointed out how political participation can raise tensions with host countries; homeland political engagement could be perceived as a threat to national integration. Several scholars have tried to classify the activities of migrant political engagement. Østergaard-Nielsen (2003) identified three broad categories: *homeland politics*, *immigrant politics* and *trans-local politics*. The former consists of those activities that migrants engage in while in their host country but concern

exclusively the political life of the origin country. Immigrant politics refers to the practices carried out with the intent to improve the social status of the migrant community in the host country. The latter concerns those activities aimed at improving and providing support to the communities of specific localities in the country of origin. Although helpful, this typology presents some weaknesses; the difference between homeland politics and trans-local politics is unclear, and transnational political activities are perceived as always playing a positive role (Martiniello and Lefleur, 2008). Martiniello and Lefleur suggested this definition of immigrant political transnationalism:

any political activity undertaken by migrants who reside mainly outside their homeland and that is aimed at gaining political power or influence at the individual or collective level in the country of residence or in the state to which they consider they belong. Such power or influence may be achieved by interacting with all kinds of institutions (local, subnational, national or international) in the country of residence and/or the home country, by supporting movements that are politically active in the country of origin or by intervening directly in the country of origin's politics (2008, p. 653).

Predominantly, scholars focused on the relationships that migrants fostered with the political arena of their home country, analysing the migrant associations committed to improving the social and political life of their area of origin. Voting in home-country elections, supporting political parties, lobbying host governments, organising protests, and engaging in activism through diaspora organisations are some of the activities that fall within this category. The analysis of these associations has made it possible to understand, firstly, that in the case of political transnationalism, cross-border contacts and social relationships hold greater significance than regular spatial mobility (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003). Secondly, political participation cannot be reduced to electoral engagement and strict political activism but must include all the informal and civic practices that, although not explicitly political, influence civil society and government policies (Messineo, 2023). However, the dimensions of political transnationalism are several and multi-layered. Legal frameworks of sending and receiving countries, institutional networks between two or more societies, citizenship policies and regulations, generational dynamics and political identities are only some of the aspects that have been researched over the years. Nonetheless, this discussion will focus on civic-political engagement carried out by immigrants.

Vertovec (2009) proposed a typology of civic-political engagement activities that includes diasporic politics, voting while abroad or travelling to vote, various forms of supporting

institutions and regimes, migrants' support or participation in homeland conflicts, mass-protesting and consciousness-raising and support for insurgence and terrorism. Østergaard-Nielsen (2003) focused also on the reasons that motivate political participation and its consequences in both contexts. Although various studies attest political participation among migrants is a minor phenomenon (Waldinger and Fitzgerald, 2004), it should not be underestimated or understood as general and homogenous, considering how diverse and fragmented the migrant communities and their interests are (Messineo, 2023).

The relevant literature offers a wide range of possible reasons for immigrant political mobilisation, but structures of opportunity should be taken into consideration alongside motivational factors (Messineo, 2023). Civic-political practices and political agency adapt to different settings, interacting with the political and institutional structures of both the home and host countries. Opportunity structures do not refer solely to institutions but also include social and cultural networks that connect immigrants to their countries of origin or engage them in the civic society of the host country (Zapata-Barrero et al., 2013). New media and technologies have a fundamental role in facilitating protest and advocacy actions by enabling communication and the creation of connections between activists in many different locations, as well as helping to internationalise local or national issues (Starikov 2018).

Political activism and engagement can be directed towards both the society of the host country and the homeland. It can manifest in informal associations and everyday practices, such as student unions, online forums, and cultural events, although scholars have primarily focused on more institutionalised organisations. Drawing from cultural diffusion theories, Boccagni et al. (2015) argue that transnational migrants influence homeland politics through social remittances, namely ideas, values, and behaviours exchanged across borders, which can shape governance, activism, and civic participation in both origin and destination countries.

1.3 Transnational Students

International student mobility is a phenomenon that dates back to the first learning institutions in the world. However, over the last decades, international mobility has undergone some considerable changes, as previously discussed. This, in turn, has shaped student mobility in today's world. The rapid increase in the number of students circulating

globally is one of the most striking trends, with figures reaching over 6 million in 2021 (UIS, 2023). de Wit et al. (2013) maintain that current student mobility consists of too many variables, such as changing national visa regulations or rising tuition fees, to be controlled by a single institution or country. Many studies have been conducted on the geopolitical and economic dimensions, referencing the internationalisation of education (Engwall, 2016) and the market of higher education (Beech, 2017), as well as the geographical trends and patterns of mobility, and national and institutional policies on enrollment and immigration.

The motivations behind the decision to study abroad is another well-documented field. For example, within the larger discourse on structural inequalities and Global South migrations towards the Global North, Vögtle & Windzio (2022) focus on four factors that, they argue, shape students' decisions to study abroad: institutional stability, the reputation of higher education systems, post-colonial ties, and cultural similarities. Institutional stability refers to poor educational infrastructure or unpredictable academic environments that can drive students to escape their home country to seek a more stable and guaranteed education. The second factor concerns the attractiveness that wealthier countries possess: the reputation of their institution in terms of academic quality, global rankings and professional facilities grants them a competitive advantage and encourages students to move abroad. When talking about post-colonial ties, the authors refer to bilateral relationships that often characterise countries that have a colonial history. These can manifest as cultural and political connections or historical and trade agreements. Facilitating students' access and permanence in the country, these relationships are argued to influence and foster students' mobility (Vögtle & Windzio, 2022). On a similar note, the fourth factor refers to the similarity in the cultural background between the home and host countries, contributing to a less intimidating experience.

Meanwhile, the individual dimension, the everyday practices of these peculiar migration experiences, the "micro" level of enquiry, has received limited scholarly attention, often considered mere academic experiences, disregarding the element of immigration in a different country. Drawing from Glick Shiller et al. (1992), Gargano (2009) introduced the concept of transnational social fields as a framework for understanding the experiences of international students. She highlighted how students are not simply recipients of a foreign education, but active participants in their transnational lives, shaping and negotiating multiple identities and social spaces. These overlapping spaces contribute to the complexity of their transnational lives, where students might be involved in both local and global

communities simultaneously (Gargano, 2009). A key aspect that the author discussed is how international students often experience both belonging and exclusion in different social contexts, owing to cultural differences, language barriers, or socio-political issues. As Gargano (2009) illustrated, the complexity and fluidity of the student-migrant experience should not be underestimated.

International student mobility is not merely an individual choice but a socially embedded practice. Drawing from Bordieau's concept of *habitus*, Tran (2016) argued that the decision to study abroad is shaped by broader social, cultural, and institutional factors. Students' habitus, the dispositions and ways of thinking shaped by their social background, plays a crucial role in how they approach their mobility. Mobility is, thus, not just about crossing borders physically but also about navigating different cultural and social fields (Tran, 2016). Students engage with the field of education as well as the larger transnational field that connects their home and host countries.

While recent studies have started to address the affective and identity-based dimensions, Soong's (2015) work stands out as an early and detailed exploration of student mobility within the transnational migration framework. In her book *Transnational Students and Mobility: Lived Experiences of Migration* (2015), Soong explores how it feels to be a student-migrant, focusing on their emotional, psychological, and identity-shaping experiences. She argues that student migration is not just about education but also about navigating a complex emotional journey shaped by hope, uncertainty, and transformation. Soong (2015) highlights some key aspects of the "student-migrant nexus": students experience a feeling of being "in-between" cultures, neither fully belonging to their home country nor the host country; they live constantly shifting languages, social norms and behaviours, experiencing cultural hybridity that oftentimes is difficult to manage due to the contrast between expectations from their families back home and the realities of adapting to a new culture. Soong (2015) reports how migration policies often treat students as temporary residents and underestimate the emotional burden of isolation and homesickness that students undergo while also dealing with the pressure to succeed academically. Academic success does not simply concern personal achievements but relates to familiar and generational dreams of a better life and is often a requirement in many legal and institutional practices of long-term settlement. These aspirations are frequently met with structural and cultural barriers; students struggle to be perceived as more than just "foreigners", they encounter discrimination and social exclusion, as well as racial profiling (Soong, 2015).

Chapter Two: The Case Study, Iran

2.1 Historical and Political Background

In a transnational perspective, to reach an understanding of the migrant's experiences, it is crucial to examine the socio-political background of the country of origin. This chapter will explore the political and social events that characterised Iran's history, from the events that led to the 1979 Islamic Revolution to the Woman, Life, Freedom Movement.

Before 1979, Iran was an Imperial State ruled by the last shah of the Pahlavi dynasty, Mohammad Reza, who assumed the throne in 1941, after his father, Reza Shah, was forced to abdicate by the Allied occupation. The political void left by Reza Shah's abdication and the absence of a strong central power provoked anti-government demonstrations that were heavily repressed by the shah, aided by the British army (Acconcia et al., 2018). The autonomy of the Azerbaijan and Kurdistan provinces, which had installed autonomous governments during the uprisings, was brutally attacked. The struggle for democracy, the foreign invasion and the tension within the polity were themes already entrenched in the Iranian society (Amanat, 2017). The prime minister, Mohammad Mossadeq, leader of the National Front, had gained popularity and support among the middle class for pursuing a democratic Iran, independent from foreign control. During his time in office, he nationalised the Iranian oil industry, suspending the deal with Great Britain, he introduced a land reform to help farmers, nationalised the transport system and the media, as well as helping domestic production and economy (Acconcia et al., 2018) For these reasons he was opposed internally by bazaar merchants and bourgeois and externally by the United States and Britain, and in 1953 was overthrown in the Operation Ajax coup d'état.

Mohammad Reza remained the only political leader and increased his power. In 1963, he undertook a project of modernisation of the country, known as the White Revolution. He favoured a secularised government and a pre-Islamic culture, limiting the influence of the clergy. Western philosophy and customs, such as clothing, were implemented top-down and diffused through society. Women's rights were improved: they were granted the right to vote and legal rights in divorce and child custody matters (Balaghi, 2013). Moreover, the shah's efforts were focused on a rushed attempt at economic development. He introduced a series

of changes that included an agricultural reform, the sale of state-owned land and the redistribution of profits among industrial workers. Yet these ended up reinforcing large landowners and local oligarchies and forced the economic system to rely on foreign capital. In centralising the political power, the lower middle class was excluded from participating in relevant economic decisions, and social inequalities increased.

Political parties, newspapers, and artists were heavily controlled and repressed, limiting political pluralism and freedom. Mohammad Reza created one of the most pervasive secret police forces in the world, the Savak. Opposition movements and entire political groups were disbanded: many members of the National Front party were killed or arrested, the communist party, the Tudeh, was persecuted and dismantled (Acconcia et al., 2018). After the recognition of the state of Israel and the oil deal with Western companies, the Shah was losing his stance among the Arab countries (Acconcia et al., 2018). The modernisation was strongly opposed, especially by the *mullah*, the community's religious leaders. Widespread discontent erupted into mass protests, uniting secular leftists, Islamists, nationalists, students, workers, and bazaar merchants. What began as opposition to authoritarianism evolved into a revolution with a religious identity, and the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini emerged as a charismatic figure, condemning the shah's regime from his exile. Responding to criticism with a sudden political liberalisation led to the organisation of the opposition movement: a transversal coalition of intellectuals, bazaar merchants, ethnic minorities, workers, migrants, and the petite bourgeoisie brought together by religious leaders. Demonstrations spread in all the major cities, and the conflicts between the government and the society gradually became violent, until the infamous Black Friday in 1978, where the military killed hundreds in Jaleh Square (Amanat, 2017). Ultimately, the shah abandoned the country and was dethroned, the revolutionary forces overcame the imperial army, and the Islamic Republic was established.

The Shia faction that triumphed in the Revolution considered democracy and the opposition of religion and politics as fruits of the West and not necessary to an Islamic society, as stressed by Khomeini: "Islam is everything and includes everything" (Fallaci, 1979). For these reasons, a new Constitution was drafted, enshrining the principle of the *velayat-e faqih*, the "absolute guardianship of the Islamic jurist". Thus, supreme authority was granted to a religious leader who continuously controls the conformity of the law to the *shari'a*, the Islamic law. The Supreme Leader holds the strongest political powers, is appointed head of the Armed Forces and can declare a state of war. Khomeini forced the idea of the Supreme

Leader, which is absent in the Shia system, as every believer chooses to follow an *ayatollah*, an expert of Islamic law, and his teachings (Acconcia et al., 2018).

In the aftermath of the Revolution, the religious components began to expel the secular and leftist counterparts. The Islamic Republican Party, IRP, was created, and Khomeini became the representative of the conservative faction that wanted an Islamic government, promising justice and equality. The IRP took control of the armed forces, repressed the request for autonomy of diverse ethnic minorities and banned several liberal groups, including the National Front (Acconcia et al., 2018). The hopes of a true plural democratic state were already diminishing. After conquering control of the parliament, the radio and television, the army and the judicial system, Khomeini initiated the so-called Cultural Revolution. Universities were purged of all the dissident members and students, male and female students were segregated, and curricula were restructured to conform to Islamic values and ideology, to establish “the cultural and political hegemony of the new elite” (Razavi, 2009, p.3). In 1980, however, the government’s attention shifted from internal restructuring to the war against Iraq.

After months of frequent border clashes and rising tension, the Iraqi president, Saddam Hussein, declared war on Iran, threatened by Iran’s ambition of exporting the revolution to Iraqi Shias, and building on a long-lasting hostility based on religious rivalries (Sunni vs. Shia) and geopolitical aspirations (Karsh, 1990). During the nine years of the war, internal repression became even more brutal in search of political and cultural homogenisation (Acconcia et al., 2018). The Islamic Republic used the war as an instrument to consolidate power, cultivating a society centred on sacrifice, martyrdom and absolute loyalty to the regime, and progressively transforming into a system of ideological control (Karsh, 1990). Hundreds of thousands of victims, food limitations, and grave economic difficulties were debilitating the population; therefore, Khomeini and the newly appointed Commander-in-Chief, Hashemi Rafsanjani, ratified the ceasefire and began the peace negotiations (Acconcia et al., 2018).

In 1989, Khomeini died and Ayatollah ‘Ali Khamenei became and is currently the new Supreme Leader. In the same year, the role of the Prime Minister was eliminated and its powers merged into the figure of the President of the Republic. Rafsanjani, who had managed to take over from Khomeini, became the 4th President of the Islamic Republic. ‘Ali Khamenei continued the centralisation of authority and suppression of opposition, although

after Khomeini's death, "the ideological cohesion of the regime started to fall apart" (Acconcia et al., 2018). During Rafsanjani's two mandates, the country saw some economic openness, but the low price of oil weakened the currency and led to inflation.

The 1997 presidential election opened a new chapter in the political landscape of the country with the victory of Mohammad Khatami, previously Minister of Culture, representative of the reformist movement, who had been advocating for freedom of speech, human rights, political pluralism and compatibility between Islam and democracy (Acconcia et al., 2018). He was seen as an innovator and possibly the solution to unemployment, inflation and political repression, and was supported by students, women, ethnic minorities and intellectuals. Khatami's reformist agenda, *eslahat*, aimed to democratise the public sphere and promote civil liberties within the framework of the Islamic Republic. This created new opportunities for political and civic engagement, particularly for youth, NGOs, students, and women activists (Rivetti, 2020). Khatami's government supported the idea of an active civil society, albeit a controlled one. As Rivetti (2020) points out, political participation was encouraged, but the state tried to discipline political activism by creating possibilities for participation "from above," and including civil society groups selectively based on their "co-optable" nature. The reformist elite viewed the increase in political participation as a tool to elicit electoral support and renew state legitimacy (Rivetti, 2020).

However, Khatami's presidency soon encountered strong opposition from the conservative forces, including the Guardian Council and radical paramilitary groups like Ansar-e Hezbollah, that undermined legislative reforms, shut down reformist newspapers, and used intimidation and violence to repress dissent. Khatami's government failed to meet the expectations of his voters: the moderate openings were cancelled by the traditionalist Right, and the general enthusiasm dampened (Rivetti, 2020). Dissent spread amongst various groups of citizens, and in 1999, anti-regime demonstrations started from the University of Tehran (Amanat, 2017). Thousands of students occupied the major cities, and the state's response was brutal: police and Ansar-e Hezbollah attacked student dorms, killed and arrested hundreds, and provoked public outrage (Acconcia et al., 2018). Khatami distanced himself from the demonstrations marking the beginning of a new wave of disillusionment and depoliticisation among youth (Bayat, 2022).

In 2009, Iranian youth's distance from politics came to a halt, and a new wave of protests invaded the streets, objecting to the second election of the ultraconservative president

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, supported by the *Pasdaran* (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) and the Supreme Leader (Acconcia et al., 2018). In his previous mandate, he took radical positions and disregarded civil society's demands for reforms. His discourse was populist and confrontational, especially on an international level, where he contributed to Iran's international isolation, particularly due to his stance on the nuclear program (Acconcia et al., 2018). The electoral results were deemed controversial, and many denounced the elections as fraudulent. Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, the two reformist candidates competing against Ahmadinejad, led the protests. These were the largest since the revolution: on the 15th of June, an estimated three million demonstrators marched from Enqelab Square to Azadi Square, chanting the slogan "Where is my vote?" (Khatam, 2023). What initially emerged as a dispute over the outcome of the presidential election quickly escalated into a broader confrontation between reformist and conservative factions within the Islamic Republic (Khatam, 2023). Many young people started calling it the Green Revolution, due to the green piece of clothing carried by activists (Acconcia et al., 2018). This movement was the culmination of the political activism and participation that took shape in the previous decade. Despite the reformist government's attempt to control political actions and Ahmadinejad's repressive regime, a minority of independent activists carried out significant work (Rivetti, 2020). Political participation shifted from institutional channels (elections, legal NGOs) to grassroots organisations, street protests, digital activism, and symbolic resistance, transforming the relationship between the citizens and the state, with many rejecting the regime's legitimacy altogether (Rivetti, 2020).

The state accused Western media of instigating a so-called "velvet coup", while national newspapers were forced to censor or remove articles about the brutality and violence of the police (Acconcia et al., 2018). The traditionalist clergy and the Supreme Leader seemed to have lost credibility. Ahmadinejad's right party was isolated from all the other parliamentary groups. Consequently, traditional mullahs condemned the opposition, accusing the leaders of the Green Movement of terrorism and placing them under house arrest. The protests were brutally suppressed: mass detentions, street violence, and the banning of all reformist organisations weakened the movement logistically and dampened the enthusiasm of the protesters (Rivetti, 2020). However, these events represent a watershed moment in public consciousness and left a legacy of activism and resistance.

In 2011, on the anniversary of the Iranian Revolution, the Supreme Leader addressed the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt and interpreted them as the natural continuation of the 1979

Islamic Revolution. He celebrated the actions of his “brothers in faith” and labelled the events as an “Islamic awakening”, suggesting that Iran’s revolutionary model remained influential and ideologically inspiring for other nations in the region (Fürting, 2013). These statements were not sympathetic recognitions of the courage of the protestors, but rather an attempt to define the revolts as exclusively Islamic and insert them in a trajectory that originated in 1979, portraying Iran as the pioneer and rightful leader in the Arab region (Fürting, 2013). The Iranian opposition, especially the leaders of the Green Movement, offered a different reading, arguing that the roots of the Arab Spring lay in the 2009 mass protests. Some days later, they called for a demonstration in solidarity with the Arab World fighting a common oppressor, authoritarianism, but the protests were banned and followed by nationwide persecutions (Fürting, 2013).

After two mandates, Ahmadinejad was succeeded by the pragmatic and moderate candidate, Hassan Rouhani, in the 2013 elections, encouraging the aspirations of the reformist movement (Acconcia et al., 2018). He played a pivotal role in advancing diplomatic negotiations over Iran’s nuclear program. Since the early 2000s, Iran restarted its nuclear program, abandoned after the Iran-Iraq War, increasing international concern due to its secretive nature and potential military dimensions, leading to diplomatic tensions and the imposition of severe international sanctions (WPNAC, 2023). Rouhani’s administration prioritised resolving the situation, ultimately reaching the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2015 with the P5+1 countries, China, Russia, Germany, France, Great Britain and the USA (WPNAC, 2023). The agreement limited Iran’s nuclear activities in exchange for sanctions relief, representing a temporary thaw in Iran’s international relations (Acconcia et al., 2018). Due to the sanctions relief, the economy stabilised, and inflation levels decreased; however, the benefits of economic growth were not evenly distributed, and many Iranians failed to see any improvements, as the unemployment rate remained elevated (Mostofi et al., 2025). Nonetheless, in 2017, Rouhani was confirmed for his second term in office, defeating the ultra-conservative candidate Ebrahim Raisi, who obtained the support of the Pasdaran and Ahmadinejad’s men (Acconcia et al., 2018).

The 2018 budget proposal that came out in December 2017 contained further cuts to fuel and cash subsidies, provoking widespread anger and regret towards the re-election of President Rouhani (Mostofi et al, 2025), along with resentment for the government’s choice to spend money on foreign policy while its citizens were suffering (BBC, 2018). The protests began in December in Mashahhad and spread nationwide for the main part of January, and

were referred to as the Dey Protest, as they happened during the month Dey of the Persian calendar. They shook the country, for they encompassed an unprecedented geographical range and the radical political slogans against the regime (Fathollah-Nejad, 2020). Protests erupted again in the Spring after the US President Donald Trump administration abrogated its commitment to the nuclear deal and imposed new sanctions, causing inflation to reach its highest levels (Mostofi et al., 2025).

But these were only the prelude to the widespread anti-regime unrest that erupted in November 2019 after “the sudden announcement of a threefold increase in petrol prices”, leading to the bloodiest episode of Iran’s recent history (Shahi & Abdoh-Tabrizi, 2020). Hundreds of thousands of people protested the political and economic situation in the country, and the government responded with the deployment of the IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps), provoking violent clashes. After two days, a total digital shutdown was enacted, and Iranians lost internet access for about a week, rendering it difficult to establish how the events unfolded (Shahi & Abdoh-Tabrizi, 2020). Reuters reports that the Supreme Leader ordered to employ any means necessary to stop the protesters, and, in less than two weeks, about 1500 people were killed (Reuters Staff, 2019). Contrary to previous uprisings, like the 2009 Green Movement, which was more urban and middle-class, protesters were increasingly from marginalised, lower-income backgrounds, including rural towns (Shahi & Abdoh-Tabrizi, 2020). Women opposing the compulsory hijab and fighting for their rights, protested alongside unpaid workers, Kurdish and Baluchi minorities and ongoing protests by Sunnis in Khuzestan (Acconcia, 2023).

In January 2020, on the eve of the coronavirus pandemic, the United States launched a drone strike in Baghdad, killing Qassem Soleimani, the Commander of the Revolutionary Guard Corps’ overseas branch, the Quds Force, for an alleged threat to US interests (BBC, 2020). While the funerals attracted thousands of regime supporters, only a few days later, young Iranians gathered in front of Tehran University, shouting “Death to the dictator!” (Acconcia, 2023). The mobilisations that occurred between 2017 and 2019 achieved little in terms of social and political advancements but further polarised Iranian society: critical voices were marginalised and often forced into exile, while conservative factions radicalised, fuelled by the anti-Iranian rhetoric of former US President Donald Trump (Acconcia, 2023).

During the pandemic, Iranians were called to the polls, as Rouhani’s mandate terminated in conflict and dissent, but apathy rather than the virus kept the voters home, and with no viable

competitor, Ebrahim Raisi, who had lost the 2017 election, won by a large margin, consolidating the conservative's faction's power (Mostofi et al., 2025). His presidency intensified authoritarian control: political repression increased, civil society space narrowed, and dissent was met with surveillance and arrests. Economically, Iran faced severe inflation, currency devaluation, and rising unemployment, exacerbated by continued U.S. sanctions and the collapse of the JCPOA (Mostofi et al., 2025). Public unrest over economic hardship, water shortages, and workers' rights surged, setting the stage for deeper crises in 2022.

2.2 The “Woman, Life, Freedom” Movement

After three days under arrest by the *morality police*, on the 16th of September 2022, the Iranian society received the news of Mahsa Amini's death. She was a young Kurdish girl, and she had been arrested for allegedly failing to properly follow Iran's strict rules on clothing, which require women to cover their hair with a scarf or hijab. The Iranian authorities released a statement attributing her death to pre-existing medical conditions. Contrary to this, many activists and people close to the family, as well as a UN Human Rights Council expert, Sara Hossain, sustained that she died due to the inhumane treatment and beatings by the morality police; the latter is also the most diffused version on social media (Borsatti, 2023). Her family accused the authorities of covering up the truth and not allowing them to know what had happened to their daughter (Yeung et al., 2022). The morality police, *Gasht-e Ershād*, is a pervasive institution that has been known for its unpredictable reactions and excessive punishments. In 2016, the Commander of State Security Force announced that “some 2000 women who wear improper clothing are arrested every day in Tehran and some other provinces” (NCRI Women Committee, 2016). Despite the authorities' declarations, Mahsa Amini outrageously died while in police custody.

Three days later, a group of feminist activists called for a mobilisation around the University of Tehran. One to two thousand people assembled on Keshavarz Boulevard to protest, finding inspiration in the Kurdish revolutionary cry “Jin, Jiyan, Azadi” (ژن ژيان ئازادى in Kurdish, or “Zan, Zendegi, Azadi”, زن زندگى آزادى in Persian), which translates in English as “Woman, Life, Freedom”, originated in 2017 in the Kurdish region of Syria, where Kurdish

forces led by women drove out the Islamic State, ISIS (Khatam, 2023). These three simple words carry the weight of decades of repressive rules, brutal violence and systematic oppression perpetrated by the Iranian government against women. Under the Islamic Republic patriarchal laws, women are unequal in matters of marriage, divorce, child custody, inheritance; are subject to obligatory rules on dress and personal appearance; are prohibited from pursuing certain professions, and the lack of laws banning gender discrimination in the workplace limits women's opportunities for advancement. Mahsa Amini's death was a tragic spark that ignited an already burning fire. The anti-regime protests quickly spread throughout the entire country, in every major city as well as smaller rural areas. Thousands of teenagers and students were the protagonists and the leaders of the movement, protesting in the streets, in the universities, and even at school, often removing their hijab in public places as an act of defiance. Iranian women rose against the government that has been eroding their rights since the revolution. Although these uprisings soon came to be characterised as an all-encompassing and intersectional struggle against the entire theocratic and authoritarian structure of the regime, women and feminist claims remain central. Active since the early days of the Revolution, women have resisted the regime's patriarchal and misogynistic structure by occupying every possible space, managing to alter certain social realities and norms, and today, women's emancipation is the gateway to the emancipation of the entire population (Bayat, 2022).

The state authorities employed unnecessary and disproportionate forces against protesters, engaging in a violent repression marked by significant human rights violations. After its first fact-finding mission, in November 2022, the UN Human Rights Council reported that Iran state authorities were responsible of egregious crimes against humanity, such as "murder, torture, rape, and also gender persecution, intersecting with ethnicity and religion", as stated by Sara Hossain, the Chairperson (Hossain, 2023, p.2). The human tide that rose against the abuse of the government was met with "firearms, including assault rifles, as well as metal pellets and paintball guns, and AK-47s, causing deaths and extensive injuries" (Hossain, 2024, p.2). In December, after three months of protests, hundreds of demonstrators were killed, thousands arrested, some of whom faced unfair trials and were executed, provoking even more public outrage (Khatam, 2023). The UN mission also revealed how ethnic minority regions, such as Kurdistan, Sistan and Baluchistan, were especially targeted by the repressive attacks. Checkpoints, curfews, and internet blackouts were used to restrict

movement and suppress dissent; arrests were arbitrary, and detainees, including children, faced torture and sexual violence (UN Human Rights Council, 2024).

Nonetheless, countless teenagers and young Iranians have continued protesting and spreading news on social media.

This generation carries a fire that does not dim in the face of repression. They document their struggles with smartphones, share their hopes on encrypted apps and carry the memory of their lost peers in every protest chant. Their courage is not just an act of defiance; it is a testament to a movement that will not be erased, despite the regime's brutal attempts to wipe it out. They demand not a better version of the cage but an end to the cage entirely. They are not speaking merely of political reform or economic restructuring; they are envisioning a different world altogether (Kalbasi, 2025).

This is one of the main traits that separates this protest from previous uprisings, the videos, photos and posts that were shared by the Iranian youth and that reached the global media space, spreading awareness on the issues that sparked the mobilisation and on the violent state response. In an attempt to curb the uprising, the government blocked access to the internet and various social media platforms, leaving the protestors to rely on VPNs and Iranians abroad to spread the voice. The videos and posts then became their only voice in front of international and Western media. At this point, “Woman, Life, Freedom” was not only a cry, but the powerful, evocative slogan of a movement that was fighting for much more than the possibility of not wearing a hijab, for a socio-political revolution, for women’s rights, for the chance of dancing and singing in the streets, for a better life. All over the world, Iranians organised manifestations in support of their compatriots, involving local activists and political representatives, to bring attention to the Iranian cause, the Iranian Revolution, immensely different from the previous one.

In its recent history, Iran has been the stage for many uprisings, but the Woman, Life, Freedom protests differ from previous mobilisations. The 2009 Green revolt was a pro-democracy movement, specifically politically connoted, and protestors sought to hold the government accountable (Bayat, 2022). The Woman, Life, Freedom movement presents a more general and profound opposition to the Islamic Republic regime and its totalitarianism, centred on human dignity and freedom from patriarchal traditions and authoritarianism (Khalaji, 2022). The Green Movement was predominantly comprised of the urban modern middle class; the 2017 uprising involved different social groups, such as unpaid workers, farmers, creditors and others, although divided in their demands; in 2019, the economy and cost-of-living issues united the poor and the middle-class poor (Bayat, 2022). Instead, the

Woman, Life, Freedom mobilisation spread among different social classes and ethnic identities — Kurds, Fars, Azeri Turks and Baluchis (Khatam, 2023; Bayat, 2022). In fact, in an Iran where inflation is increasingly high and 50% of the population lives below the poverty line, economic rights represent a critical issue deeply intertwined with social rights, explaining why bazaar merchants and truck drivers joined in support of the protesters, going on a three-day strike (Acconcia, 2023). Furthermore, one of the important differences refers to the absence of a clergy component. In the eyes of the protestors, clerics represent the foundation of the legitimacy of an entire political system that perpetrated and justified human rights violations based on divine authority claims (Khalaji, 2022).

The religious authorities, with Khamenei at the forefront, have shown no intention of responding to the demands of the protesters, instead promoting a narrative that portrayed them as traitors incited by foreign enemy powers such as the United States and Israel (Borsatti, 2023). Moreover, moral police actions were intensified, the powers of the Pasdaran were expanded, and in public administrations, dismissals and co-optations of personnel loyal to the regime took place (Acconcia, 2023). Some hesitation was expressed among the Ayatollahs in Qom, particularly in relation to the brutality of the Pasdaran and the executions, but these concerns were ignored by the regime leadership and held little significance in the eyes of the protesters, who advocate for abandoning the theocracy in favour of establishing a secular democracy (Borsatti, 2023). For this reason, they remained indifferent to the weak reform proposals put forward by moderate reformists, fully aware of the need for a real revolution (Borsatti, 2023). While figures like former President Khatami called for a return to the spirit of the Constitution and the implementation of democratic reforms, the leader of the Green Movement, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, supported the drafting of an entirely new constitutional charter (Borsatti, 2023). Mousavi also spoke out strongly against the brutal repression and the betrayal of the promises of the 1979 Revolution, which was meant to free the country from monarchical rule and foreign domination (Acconcia, 2023).

Three years later, the main manifestations may be over, but Iran's resistance continues and the impact of the Woman, Life, Freedom Movement is anything but marginal. The protests have had deep symbolic and practical effects: they disrupted the regime's ideological foundations by inspiring solidarity across ethnic, linguistic, and religious divides, demonstrating the failure of oppression policies and receiving strong support from the male counterpart (Bazafkan, 2023). Moreover, the movement has extended beyond the country's borders through the diaspora's media campaigns and educational activism, synchronising

with global feminist campaigns and creating a transnational wave of resistance. Despite state repression, the protests “have brought about an enormous change within society concerning the role and rights of women in the social and family structure” and redefined the role of Iranian women in both local and global political discourse, inspiring a broader struggle for justice, freedom, and systemic change (Bazafkan, 2023).

The election of Masoud Pezeshkian, the first reformist president since Khatami, to the presidency of the Islamic Republic in 2024 has generated new expectations, both within the country and in the international community. Pezeshkian has criticised the morality police and the strict enforcement of the compulsory hijab law and has expressed support for opening up to the West to improve the economic situation, effectively adopting a more moderate stance compared to the ultraconservative faction, however, his loyalty to the Supreme Leader and the Islamic Republic remains absolute (Il Post, 2024, July 7). His cabinet is largely composed of members from the previous administration, with the exception of the Foreign Minister, a well-known moderate, and a female minister, while almost no openings have been made toward minority groups (Il Post, 2024, August 12). On a more positive note, Pezeshkian has managed to reopen negotiations on a possible nuclear agreement with the United States, which, given the fragile state of Iran’s economy and political instability, are aiming to reach a more favourable deal than that of 2015 (Il Post, 2025, April 19). Despite these small steps forward, on April 29, Iran witnessed a new wave of protests spreading across the country, denouncing systemic injustices, political repression, economic crisis, and the deterioration of public services, while the families of political prisoners gathered in front of Evin prison to continue the campaign against the death penalty and unjust executions (CNRI, 2025, May 4).

According to the latest report by the United Nations Human Rights Council Fact-Finding Mission, published on 14 March 2025, the Iranian government has intensified its repression of women’s rights, and despite the pre-election promises of Pezeshkian, the authorities have tightened control through the use of surveillance technologies and increased legal persecution of women defying the compulsory hijab (Hossain, 2025). Thus, the regime has remained formally intact and shown few signs of openness to the demands of the population, but something has started to break down. The legitimacy of the Islamic Republic is being challenged on multiple fronts. The gap between state and society is growing wider, social demands have become intertwined with economic and legal ones, and resistance has become radicalised. Internal conflicts have emerged within the regime’s parliamentary factions, and

attempts at reconciliation have failed, resulting in a dangerous political deadlock (Taghati, 2025, March 31). The regime also finds itself in an increasingly unstable position due to the war in Palestine; its longstanding conflict with Israel and recent developments have rendered relations with international powers both ambiguous and volatile. The 2022 protests and the Woman, Life, Freedom movement have fundamentally reshaped how a significant portion of the population conceives of freedom and their rights. They have set in motion a new form of resistance, comprised of individuals no longer afraid to sacrifice themselves and unwilling to submit to a regime defined by repression and abuse. Women and younger generations have paved the way for a cultural and social revolution: they have not overthrown the government, but they have transformed society, demonstrating extraordinary strength and resilience.

2.3 The Iranian Diaspora

Diaspora etymologically derives from the Greek word and means “dispersion” or “dissemination,” particularly referring to a population, and was originally used to indicate the Jewish community’s dispersal. In modern times, it is commonly utilised to indicate the mass migration of people towards other locations and the formation of settlements and communities. In Migration and Cultural Studies, theorists have widely discussed the meaning and characteristics of this phenomenon, and, in the last 40 years of academic discourse, various conceptualisations have been proposed.

Cohen’s (2008) categorisation identifies four key phases of the definition of diaspora as a theoretical tool. The classical theory referred mainly to the dispersal of Jewish people and was concerned with the traumatic causes of forced dispersal. In the 1970s, it was extended to Armenians, Irish and European religious minorities, framing diaspora in terms of victimhood (Bhandari, 2021; Faist, 2010). A traumatic historical experience that preserves the collective memory of a homeland, the lack of integration in the host cultural space and a longing to return home were the main components of the first conceptualisation (Bhandari, 2021). A more complex discussion around the concept of homeland characterised the second phase, initiated by the work of Safran (1991). While encompassing a more heterogeneous variety of experiences, differing in the historical and cultural experiences as well as in the relationship with the home and host country, the concept of homeland remained central in

defining the diasporic identity. This framework assumed that diasporic identities were anchored to the origin's culture and community, shaped by the real or imagined relationship with their country, often alienated and marginalised in the host society, while subject to feelings of nostalgia, loss and commitment towards the maintenance and prosperity of the homeland (Bhandari, 2021; Cohen & Yefet, 2019; Safran, 1991).

In contrast, the third phase, often referred to as the social constructionist or postmodern phase, shifted the focus toward identity as fluid, de-territorialised, and context dependent. This perspective critiques binary notions of home and host country, and instead emphasises hybridity, multiple belongings, and diaspora as a third space where new identities are continuously negotiated (Bhabha, 1994; Clifford, 1994; Hall, 1994). These conceptualisations will be criticised for their depoliticised nature, and the fourth phase recognises the importance of issues like structural power, inequality and historical injustice. It reintroduces material concerns such as class struggle, labour exploitation, racism, and insists that diaspora must be studied not just as a discursive space but as one embedded in real-world structures of domination and resistance (Král, 2009). The historical violence and colonial oppression that shaped displacement and mass migration should not be forgotten, nor should the importance of the homeland be disregarded, not as an identity anchor, but as a site of political memory and contested belonging, especially for those seeking justice, recognition and return (Cohen, 2008; Král, 2009; Tölölyan, 2000).

Situated within this broader theoretical evolution, the several waves of Iranian migration reveal how shifting political, social, and economic conditions have given rise to distinct diasporic trajectories, shaped by both structural forces and cultural imaginaries. A significant distinction can be made between the waves of immigration that preceded the 1979 Iranian revolution and those after the establishment of the Islamic Republic. While the former were mostly economic and student migrations, the latter were mainly composed of exiles and political refugees attempting to escape the establishment of a Shi'ite theocratic regime, the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war, and the consequent violent oppression of political dissidents (Cohen & Yefet, 2019). Although initially the immigrants were, for the most part, wealthy intellectuals and Shah supporters, in the mid-1990s, the deterioration of the economic situation led to flows of migration from Iran's peripheral areas and lower socioeconomic backgrounds, which continued after the imposition of the economic sanctions and the re-election of President Ahmadinejad in 2009 (Cohen & Yefet, 2019).

With estimates suggesting that between three and six million Iranians live abroad, Iranian diasporic communities are present on every continent, as a result of different migration experiences, which shaped their attitude towards the homeland (Cohen & Yefet, 2019). The first generation of Iranian exiles initially expressed their attachment to the homeland by nostalgically reproducing an “authentic” Iranian culture Mohabbat-Kar (2016), in light of their self-perception as “the true representative of the authentic collective memory” (Cohen & Yefet, 2019, p.5). Hatred towards the Islamic Republic, a shared political identity and the social mobilisation towards the restoration and return to the homeland shaped their culture (Cohen, 2008). However, over time, as they settled into host countries, their memory of Iran became more imagined. Mohabbat-Kar (2016) emphasises that the diasporic connection to the homeland is dynamic, shaped both by the circumstances of departure and evolving experiences abroad.

Later flows of migration, which had a voluntary nature and lacked the exilic dimension, highlighted the fragmentation of the immigrant community; factors such as social class, religious affiliation, as well as the motivations and the time of migration create distinct subgroups interconnected through overlapping networks that form multiple, intersecting transnational social fields rather than a single national identity (McAuliffe, 2008). Moreover, despite the fragmentation within the diaspora, Mohabbat-Kar (2016) introduces the idea of an “alternative Iranian map”, a transnational network of Iranian communities extending beyond Iran’s borders, linking cities like Los Angeles, Toronto, Sydney, and various European capitals (Mohabbat-Kar, 2016).

Globalisation and the proliferation of digital communication technologies have significantly intensified these dynamics, facilitating the construction of multiple, de-territorialised forms of belonging, enabling the creation of a transnational frame of reference and identification beyond the traditional dichotomy of homeland and host country (Mohabbat-Kar, 2016). Consequently, the earlier notion of a fixed, exilic identity has gradually given way to a more fluid and networked diasporic identity (Cohen & Yefet, 2019). Nonetheless, the homeland has not become entirely peripheral or irrelevant; for example, certain groups and actors continue to centre their political engagement around opposition to the Iranian regime.

Chapter Three: An Exploratory Research

3.1 Methodology

This study aims to provide insight into the lives of transnational students, exploring how they navigate the various challenges that arise from moving abroad and undertaking a higher education programme in a new sociocultural environment. The intent is to focus on personal experiences through a qualitative approach to shed light on what it feels like to be a transnational student today, in an increasingly globalised and mediatised world. Although international student mobility and the internationalisation of education have been the subject of extensive research, the individual journey, along with the emotional and pragmatic challenges, and the everyday life of the students, has not received the same consideration. Frequently, migrating students are considered only under the academic scope, but as Soong (2015) argued, their lived experiences extend beyond the academic boundaries on a legal, cultural and social level, calling for a reconceptualisation of students' mobility within the broader migration framework of transnationalism. This research's purpose is to contribute to the understanding of the various dimensions that student migration encompasses through a transnational lens.

The study examines the case study of Iranian students who relocated to Italy to attend the University of Padova. This specific choice arose from various reasons. Methodologically, the significant presence of Iranian nationals in the municipality of Padova, exceeding a thousand, according to the latest data (IstatData, 2024), many of whom are students enrolled at the University, revealed an intriguing migration pattern and a high likelihood of shared experiences, both individually and within the community. Thus, strengthening the potential to draw connections between individual narratives. On a more personal level, my preexisting personal connection with several Iranian students is what sparked my interest in the international student mobility phenomenon, and more specifically, in the lived experiences of Iranian students, particularly in light of Iran's current sociopolitical context. These connections provided a contextual and personal familiarity, which facilitated access to the field and, building on a foundation of trust and friendship, supported the sampling process.

Seeing that this research aimed to reach a deep and rich understanding of the participants' lives and the meanings they constructed and negotiated through their experience, an

exploratory stance and a qualitative approach were adopted. Rather than testing pre-existing theories, this study sought to conceptualise the data inductively through a transnational lens, allowing themes to emerge from the participants' narratives. In this context, the purposive sampling strategy adopted reflects both the absence of a generalisation objective and the intent to establish a sense of trust and safety among participants, facilitating what could be sensitive conversations. More specifically, a snowballing sampling method was adopted. I shared the study's aim and information with some of my personal connections, who had also agreed to take part in the research. They then circulated the information within their wider social networks, and participants reached out to me voluntarily, ensuring that involvement was based on interest and informed consent. Two key criteria were applied to ensure coherence in the sample and avoid a purely randomised selection. First, all participants were either currently enrolled or had recently completed their studies at the University of Padova, which also allowed for a relatively consistent age range, roughly between 20 and 30 years old. Second, gender balance was intentionally maintained to consider its influence. Owing to time limitations, a total of ten individuals constitute the sample size.

The method chosen to conduct the empirical research is the interview, more specifically, dialogical interviews, which aim at the co-construction of meaning through the interaction between the interviewer and the participant. The aim is not to "collect" data, but to engage in a dialogue where both parties contribute to the meaning-making process. The interviewees are guided towards the narration of stories and episodes, in which they can propose their considerations and opinions, whether explicitly or implicitly (La Mendola, 2009). This reflects on the preparation of the interview guide, comprised of a series of prompts, more than questions, which will guide the conversation without structuring it; every interview is a standalone ritual that unfolds differently, as each participant chooses where to steer the conversation and how much detail to offer. Thus, the interview guide is created by carefully choosing the wording of the possible prompts, aiming to generate episodic and reflective narrations. This method aligns with the research's interpretive and ethical commitment to centre on the lived experiences, voices, and agency of the participants.

The interviews were analysed using a thematic analysis grounded in the theoretical framework presented in the first chapter, Transnationalism. After conducting and transcribing the interviews, the analysis began with an inductive phase, allowing themes to emerge organically from the data through a coding approach. Recurring patterns, concepts, and expressions were identified through diverse rounds of reading, with particular attention

paid to how participants narrated their experiences, structured their reflections, and articulated meaning around key moments and challenges. As the analysis progressed, an iterative process of theme development and refinement was undertaken. Codes were progressively aggregated in categories, from which broader themes emerged. The themes were not treated as isolated units, but as interrelated dimensions, and, in the end, interpreted through the theoretical framework of transnationalism.

Moving within a constructivist and interpretivist framework, it is essential to reflect on the researcher's positionality and its influence on the production of knowledge. The researcher is not a neutral observer but a co-creator of meaning, and therefore, it's necessary to acknowledge how the researcher's biography and previous assumptions shape and impact the development and results of the research. I hereby acknowledge that my preexisting friendship and emotional connection with some of the participants, as well as my strong personal interest in the instances brought forward by the Iranian movement "Woman, Life, Freedom", informed my initial thoughts and assumptions. These previous connections need to be taken into consideration regarding the level of openness and trust established during the interviews, which is probably deeper than the one present during the other interviews. At the same time, this contextual familiarity allowed me to access a shared universe of meaning in which many of the stories and narratives were situated, facilitating my understanding and supporting the connection with the participants. Nonetheless, I am a European white woman, situated within a position of cultural and geopolitical privilege, so my understanding of many dynamics that emerged during this research remains limited. A continuous process of reflexivity was therefore essential to remain accountable in the analysis and representation of participants' voices.

On a final note, all participants were provided with detailed information about the aims of the study, the interview procedure and how the interview recording would be managed. Each interviewee was assured anonymity and confidentiality, was asked to choose a pseudonym to be used in transcripts and analysis, and all identifying details were removed from the extracts present in this dissertation. I transcribed verbatim all the interviews; no other person has had access to their personal information. Moreover, their informed consent and their willingness to proceed with the interview were explicitly confirmed on multiple occasions. They were also made aware of their right to withdraw at any point.

3.2 What does it mean to be a transnational student today?

3.2.1 *A jump into the unknown*

One of the first recurring elements to emerge from the interviews is the limited familiarity participants had with the context into which they were entering. For many, the decision to study abroad was made with relatively little prior knowledge about the destination. Their arrival in Padova was marked not only by logistical challenges but by a broader process of discovery, shaped by spontaneity and uncertainty. Their migration was shaped not only by physical displacement but by a sense of being thrust into unfamiliar terrain, geographically, institutionally, and socially.

One day I just opened this telegram account, it was saying that this University of Padova it's offering this kind of like scholarship, and I was like, okay, [...] so I applied for it, and I didn't even know Padova existed before that. I remember I applied for it, and I got accepted and then like a couple of weeks later I got accepted for scholarship, so I was like, okay, I'm going. And then I searched for Padova and in google I remember, the first thing I saw in Google maps was that there are these Brenta and Bacchiglione, and then I searched in Google images and there was only Prato della Valle, so my idea was that the little flow in Prato della Valle is actually the river. So, I didn't know anything. -Moe

This account aligns with Mazzucato's (2008) notion of "situated transnationalism," in which migrants' engagements and decisions are deeply shaped by life stage, contextual constraints, and contingent circumstances.

And I haven't been to any foreign university, so I didn't know what to expect. I felt like it would be very serious, it would be very difficult to deal with, very challenging. So, I arrived like around twenty minutes late because I still didn't know how the buses worked, how the trams work. Everything was new. [...] I moved in here and I knew nobody. I knew nothing about this city. -Farhad

I was quite late to the semester because it starts at the end of September, and I was late because of my visa situation. And throughout the whole process, the university was okay with it, because they knew it wasn't our fault that we weren't here, but it was the embassy or the bureaucratic process. So, I knew some professors, I knew some students, virtually of course, but I never saw anyone, met anyone in person and I caught everything in November. I didn't know anyone and when I arrived the classes were basically over, so I didn't have the opportunity to meet my professors until the exams. -Laleh

These narratives suggest that the participants' academic journey began with a leap into the unknown. Their experiences reflect a form of adaptive navigation, an evolving process of orienting oneself within complex and unfamiliar environments. Their first encounters with

Padova and the university system illustrate how transnational mobility is lived not as a seamless transition but as an unfolding engagement with the unknown, negotiated day by day.

3.2.2 Navigating bureaucracy, structural constraints and unequal treatment

Administrative and institutional interactions significantly shape the everyday experiences of transnational students. Throughout the interviews, participants repeatedly described navigating opaque bureaucratic systems, dealing with inefficiencies and miscommunications, and encountering discriminatory behaviours. These challenges often went beyond mere inconvenience, shaping not only their academic trajectories but also their emotional and psychological well-being.

I think two weeks before my flight, I realised that the scholarship that I was eligible for, which they gave me. Like they first issue a list, that's your document and if you are eligible for the scholarship you're going to get it in March. And then two weeks before I arrive, they issued this list, and I wasn't on that list. And they said: "Oh we don't know when we are going to give you the money". So that's stress and that's a part of the university experience. -Lelah

As Lelah recounted, the effect of this lack of efficiency in academic institutions has a huge impact on the lives of incoming students, leaving them hanging in the balance, uncertain if they can actually move forward with their plans, since for most of them everything depends on the scholarship offered by the university. Students are made to absorb institutional disorganisation as personal stress (Soong, 2015). In response, grassroots community-based networks organise informal:

It was really bad actually. If you mean like the parts of the university, I think you know, there are a lot of Iranians here and because of the community, we have like a lot of groups in Telegram or WhatsApp, mostly Telegram. And like most of the things I understood how to do it in a like bureaucratic system I understood it from the Telegram groups of Iranians. Like I was constantly asking questions or reading the text messages or there are also, even, how do you say, like people wrote PDFs, how to like do stuff in Persian. Like that's how I know what to do, step by step, like university didn't e-mail us anything about how like go to questura or how to, I don't know, exactly fill certain forms or nothing really. So, I feel lucky to have that community. -Raha

Through digital communications and networks of relations, the community of Iranians already located in the territory supports the newly arrived by sharing information and tips on how to navigate the system. Where the institutions fail, informal transnational networks step in to provide crucial knowledge, emotional support, and procedural guidance, allowing

students to access basic rights and navigate complex bureaucracies. Transnational social spaces are constituted not only by the movement of people across borders but by the resources exchanged within these spaces, where social capital, in the form of knowledge, experience, and solidarity becomes a vital resource (Faist, 2000). Another example is illustrated by Raha when referring to the banking issue. International economic sanctions imposed upon Iran, first by the United States in the early 2000s, and later by the Europe Union and the United Nations as a response to Iran's nuclear program, led to significant financial restrictions, including the inability of many Iranian citizens to open regular bank accounts abroad.

But we cannot go, I think we cannot go to normal banks, and we only have Revolut, most of the Iranians only use Revolut accounts and, for example, a lot of us had problems because our permesso got expired. It was I think the second year, and our next appointment was like months after. So, there was a gap in between. We didn't have permesso and for Revolut you have to update your documents and after certain months they limit your account if you don't upload new documents. So even not only Iranians, but we were trying to like make a solution for the Pakistani people, Indian people. I think also a few other nationalities that we all had this problem. And there was one guy from (a collective) and other collectives, I don't remember, they were trying to make a solution. -Raha

Once again, the bureaucracy surrounding the acquisition of a residency permit is problematic, putting the migrants at risk of having their financial resources frozen, and the solution come from community-based help and mutual support. Bureaucratic opacity and inflexible requirements, combined with external geopolitical pressures, compound the difficulties faced by these students, who rely on one another to access basic services and retain financial agency. These situations perfectly exemplify how transnational migration experiences are shaped by the interaction between individual agency and external structural factors (Boccagni, 2012; Mazzucato, 2008; Lacroix, 2014).

The difficulty associated with navigating the fallacious bureaucracy dimensions are in certain cases aggravated by hostility and discriminative behaviour:

I had a very bad experience, at the office that is in charge of scholarship. [...] I was in one extra semester, and I had to pay the tuition fee to university, and I went to do the paperwork to get the ISEE for me, so I can like partly pay the tuition fee. And I was in the situation that I needed to submit my complete thesis like in one week. So, I went there, he was so racist, and he told me, "Oh you were lying, all your papers are a lie" and he imitated me in a very bad way. [...] The only thing that I didn't do was I translated them here, not in Iran, because the translator told me that if you translate it here with me is the best way. [...] So, I went to his boss, and he couldn't speak English, so another girl came, I spoke with her and the guy, the racist guy, told him that "she needs to tell you something else" like this ((with a mocking voice)). I couldn't believe him, like really, who are you? Are you even a human? -Elaheh

Such encounters, from Elaheh account, exemplify the dehumanisation and racialisation that characterise routine procedures, becoming moments of control and judgement, during which immigrants are forced to perform legitimacy in front of institutional gatekeepers (Khosravi, 2010). These racialised and discriminatory behaviour emerge from many different accounts and encompass various contexts and situation, demonstrating the systemic nature of racism and xenophobia. These dynamics extend beyond institutional offices and encompass the broader social fabric, influencing access to housing, equal academic treatment, and the experience of everyday interactions:

And I think the most challenging part for us was finding a house. But the moment that they would understand we are Iranian, they would be like no, or like they had given it to other people, or they would not answer. Basically, like 20% of the houses we called would answer. And then out of those 20% very few, one of them would be agreeing on getting the house to like an Iranian. I don't know why they feared it. -Karen

There was this time when we were in the exam and our course was entirely in English, but I looked and I saw my Italian classmates writing the exam in Italian and that was very, very not fair, dude. Like how, how could someone let them do that. We had the exact same degree in Italian in our department, so they could if they wanted to continue in Italian they could, but they chose English, and that's not fair. I'm smarter in my own language. -Lelah

Even a lighter and spirited illustration of how Roya's experience improved after her effort to learn Italian reveal a pattern of exclusion:

But from this month I started to learn Italian and I, I went to offices, and I talked to Italian, it was totally different. Yes, I, I mean, they were so, so kind, I mean more kind or more friendly, not maybe because of the Italian, that I understand, maybe because when I'm talking in English, maybe some people cannot understand very well and they are focusing on understand what I want to say, okay, and they cannot show their feelings or this stuff. But when I'm talking in Italian and they will say, ok, I'm a foreigner that I'm trying to talk in Italian, they act very nice, very, very nice. Even I cannot talk in Italian fluently or slowly I'm talking, they act very, very nice, yeah. So, I, I talked to my teacher, Italy with English is different from Italy with Italian. -Roya

Roya's reflection suggests that recognition and respect are contingent upon linguistic adaptation. Her increased ease does not emerge from a more inclusive environment, but from her successful effort to perform "integration." This reinforces the idea that migrant legitimacy is evaluated through one's ability to conform.

3.2.3 Precarious beginnings and the cost of adaptation

For many of the participants, securing stable housing emerged as one of the most immediate and distressing obstacles upon arrival in Italy. This common struggle was aggravated by the limited knowledge they held about the system and the infrastructures of Padova. This created a series of issues that piled up and ultimately affected the amount of time and energy they could reserve to their studies:

The situation was very difficult because I arrived late, and I couldn't find a house in Padova. [...], I couldn't go to university in the first days because that I was searching for a house. And finally, finally I have found the house but not in Padova in Saonara. [...] It's 30 minutes by bus and also there were not buses every day or every moment, so after 8 we should be at home because it was so late and, yeah, it was a very bad situation that days. Also, when I finally I found the house, my phone destroyed and for one month I didn't have phone. Because of this problem I couldn't go somewhere because I needed google maps, because I didn't know the city, where the university is and this stuff. [...] Also, I had a problem with my flatmates. There were eight people in our house, and it was so noisy, and I couldn't study, I could go to the library only during the day because after eight I should go back home -Roya

What might appear as a peripheral concern reveals itself as a central factor in shaping students' early experiences of settlement, demonstrating how material and spatial conditions are deeply entangled with academic engagement. Roya's opportunity to have a quiet moment to study depended entirely on the absence of suitable public transport and on the inaccessibility of centrally located accommodation. Similarly, Farhad experience is marked by having to initially adapt to an expensive old house, where energy costs were inflated due to the structural condition of the building and the lack of prior knowledge among residents about local utility expenses.

But the house that I got was beside the IKEA in the middle of the industrial zone. Literally the next street had a sign saying Padova finished. And we were like the only residential house in that area, everything else that was there was companies. [...] And I used to share that contract in house with nine other people. It was a huge house, and I had my own room, but I was paying a lot for a house, 400 euros a month bills excluded. So, I had to pay other expenses. And when you live with nine people in an old house, that's not been used for nine years, the energy prices are going to be high, especially if those nine people are from Iran and has and have no, no idea of what energy could cost here. -Farhad

On an additional note, Karen highlights how the difficulty of navigating these conditions was intensified by the language barrier:

The first month was very, very hard because I was living in Colombo and nothing, not a living creature was nearby. And if you are a student without a car, without even a bike, nothing like the

nearest supermarket to you was like Conad, you know, the living was tough. And of course, if you don't live well, you cannot really go to the university. Well, I mean, I went to the university every day, [...] and I had to run towards the bus, get the bus going to the university and then come back. And I remember that twice there were no buses passing by and I couldn't get back there. And I didn't know anything like basically I didn't even know how to go and start like getting a bike, not joking. And it was a tough period of going, coming back, not understanding Italian, not a word. - Karen

The everyday conditions of international students' lives directly inform their ability to participate meaningfully in academic life. These accounts show how student migration is deeply embodied and materially grounded experience, shaped by the necessity of adaptation, whose cost is whose cost is often borne in time and financial scarcity, stressful conditions and emotional labour. The capacity to succeed academically is thus inseparable from the students' broader struggles to secure stable and manageable structural conditions (Tran, 2016).

3.2.4 Getting through the friendship wall

The most widely explored dimension in the participants' narratives is the one relative to friendships and the difficulties that arise when attempting to create meaningful social relation with the locals, especially inside the academic context:

But about classmates I actually couldn't find friends. Maybe I didn't try so much, or I don't know. I know only Iranian student in my class or some international students, but I don't know Italian classmates. Yeah, it was really difficult, I don't know maybe because they had like a group with their friends and to enter that group was so difficult. I couldn't be friend with them. -Roya

Roya's report exemplifies many participants' accounts of forming connections mainly with other conational or international students, due to the hardship of befriending Italian classmates.

Then I understood that it is kind of hard for us to find friends because of multiple reasons. One of them, which I completely understood, was that people usually find their friends... like in the university campus life, the friendships are made throughout the bachelor. And then you arrive here, and you have these groups that are made and then it would be hard to just infiltrate the groups. It's not as easy as I had the chance in my bachelor. The second thing, also I understood it, because I had this like 1-2 months of masters in Iran, which I then quit to come here. But even there I was the one who had all these walls for the newcomers. [...] So, I had my friends, and with the newcomers who were coming to the university from other universities, I was like nah. I understood, I don't say I liked it, but I sympathised with the guys here. And then the second thing is the whole international campus thing, which I really don't like. So, like there is this kind of

separation which I don't think it's a systemic separation, but I think it's a consequence of having this kind of international campus introduced in the university, which was not that much international like three years ago. And this causes the students not to be mixed well. -Moe

The academic environment appears fragmented, and Moe reports both a structural problem and a personal recognition of the mechanisms of social exclusion. He reflects on his own experience of not engaging with newcomers during his previous university journey, thus shedding light on how ingroup dynamics and pre-existing social circles hinder the integration of new arrivals. Moreover, the transformation of the university into a more “international campus,” he suggests, has unintentionally produced parallel social worlds rather than fostering intercultural exchange.

But, as reported in the following extracts, the participants were often the object of intentional acts of exclusion and separation, creating hostile and unfriendly environments:

Another semester we had a group project, and I went at like seven in the morning to the first class because I wanted to... I didn't know, as I said, so many people, so I wanted to talk to them, and I wanted to see if I can make a good like... being in a good group of people. And the moment I talked to three of the people I knew, I barely knew, I was like, so do you have groups? Can I join your groups? Can I join your group project? They were like, no, we already decided, we already have a group. It was 7 in the morning, the first moment. And all of the groups were Italians and internationals completely divided and no one, like a professor, have the control to mix up the groups. No one cares. -Laleh

But also, there was another thing which I didn't know in the first two years, and it made me fall even more behind. It was the fact that all of the students here, they had a friend in the Italian course, or they had connections, so they knew about the past exams, how the professor takes the exams. They had even the sbobina, before the Italians did not even give us the access to like we were doing the sbobine, but they were giving us just the sbobina that we did on that year. But we international students didn't have access to that. And I got the access after two years. -Karen

These exclusionary dynamics reflect what Soong (2015) identifies as the emotional labour and hidden struggles of international students in the academic community, frequently positioned at its periphery, left to construct alternative support systems with other international peers. This marginalisation has emotional and psychological ramifications. As Soong (2015) highlights, the sense of disconnection, inferiority, and frustration that arises from these experiences can lead to what she terms “emotional misrecognition”, the internalisation of systemic exclusion as personal failure.

These dynamics are intertwined with cultural and language differences that aggravate the difficulties of forming friendships. Language barriers not only limit communication but also act as symbolic markers of insider versus outsider status.

Italians were mostly grouped with each other, so I, it was a bit hard for me to like, try to get to their groups. And that's why I was more with international students rather than Italians. Don't get me wrong, I made friends with Italians, but it was a bit harder for me because I felt that there was language barrier for them. -Elaheh

It was really hard to like know people here at first. [...] First of all, it's the language barrier, I don't know Italian. The second is the cultural barriers, of course, but I didn't know like Middle Eastern countries are really warmer. So, for example, in my country, if you give someone a lighter, you are friends forever. You're going to say hi every day to each other and that's it. Like it's easy. But here, like I invited people to my house, and I cooked Persian foods for them for four fucking hours. And then like the next day maybe they just say like hi, brief hi and like that's it. Like we never talk with each other. And most of the friends that I had were also international students, like Ethiopian, Tunisian. And I really felt more connected with them. -Raha

The participants' accounts reinforce the notion that mobility is not merely the act of crossing geographical boundaries, but a profound transition across symbolic and relational fields (Tran, 2016).

3.2.5 The importance of a support network

The interviews support the importance highlighted by Portes et al. (1999) of considering individuals' support networks. While institutional support structures were often limited or inadequate, it was the presence of friends, peers, and familiar community members that provided strength and confidence, emotional stability, and practical guidance. Some participants arrived already embedded within supportive personal networks, easing their adjustment to the new environment:

So, when I arrived, I had a friend here and we've been friends for a long time, eight years. So, it was like having a family member here and she already established a friend group for herself, which, because we are friends, I knew they would also be close to my taste in friendship [...]. So, I went the safe way and went to meet her friends, and I also knew I another girl, also eight years. So, the whole friendship thing was a very easy thing for me because I already had my boyfriend here, I already had my two best friends here. It was like I didn't feel alone. -Lelah

This sense of continuity in relationships facilitated smoother integration and reduced the emotional toll of building a social community from the start.

Elaheh described how moving through the migration process with a close friend helped her persist during moments of doubt:

And along all of this journey, I was with a friend. We took our exam together, we translated our documents together, we applied together, we got accepted to UniPD together. We looked for accommodation together, we got the accommodation together. So, the moment that we came to Padova, we went to a dorm and then we found this house. So, it was good that I wasn't alone during this whole journey. I don't know if I was persistent enough if I was alone because it got hard sometimes and you may second doubt yourself that what if I don't really want that? But because I was with her, we really wanted to do it together. -Elaheh

These testimonies highlight the ways in which friendships functioned as stabilising forces, especially during the vulnerable early phases of the mobility, serving as a buffer against isolation and uncertainty.

For others, community formed gradually after arriving, and become an important support system to navigate the academic life:

In my class? Uh, we were around ten Iranians in my class at first and the arriving time was not the same for each of us. For example, I came in September, someone, I remember, they came in the late December. At the end of the, you know, first year we become united, and we were helping each other with the assignments and like we had our group of studying, we were studying together. -Clarissa

The participants highlighted the importance of the emotional support role of these network of friendships, enabling them to feel grounded and at home in their new environment. In this sense, support networks extended beyond task-based solidarity and into the realm of affective integration (Levitt & Glick Shiller, 2004), nurtured in the small moments of shared living, conversation, and mutual curiosity.

But thankfully, since my roommates were nice people, I could hang out with them like until midnight or 3-4 am talking about different things. I don't know, our specialties, what you're studying, our experiences, language, politics, religion, whatever the content. No matter the topic, they managed to get together and enjoy our company, each other's company. -Farhad

And yeah, I mean, nice friends, when you move abroad is one of the, I think, most important part of your life. Like through friends, I think you get connected to the life that you have here. One of the main things that I learned that you should have good connections here, to feel connected to life, you know, through their hearts and through their support. And, of course, you give them the same and it's like giving and taking. It makes you feel a bit more at home. -Clarissa

These connections provided care, understanding, and a space for emotional expression. In the face of political trauma and personal upheaval, the availability of empathic listening and

mutual care created a stabilising force. These friendships, rather than being peripheral to the migrant experience, emerge as core infrastructures of resilience.

They, I'm talking about this eight people group, know what's happening. If they could comfort me, if they could learn more, if they could know more, if they could get more familiar with the situation. If I needed a shoulder to cry on, that's what makes made everything worth it, yeah. When you immigrate, you're like, oh my God, I can't talk to them if my country is going to go on a war, that's, first, very traumatic, second, very annoying, like I can't just drop the bomb like that. But then they asked, and it was just so nice and for some people it was very hard to explain to, like from where I have to begin to arrive to this point? But some just wanted to know because they were good friends and good people. Yeah, that's the most meaningful thing, I think. -Lelah

As such, social networks constitute a key dimension of student migration, as vital as institutional structures or academic frameworks.

3.2.6 New opportunities and uncertain futures

The participants' narratives reveal a profound sense of gratitude and joy as they reflect on their migration journeys, emphasizing the opportunities they have encountered and the newfound feelings of fulfilment and serenity that have accompanied their settlement in Italy.

I feel Padova is my home, really. When I went back to Iran after some days, I missed Padova. When I was living in Iran, it is my home and I like it, my first home, but in Iran I was not independent. I was living with my family in my family house and this stuff. But from when I came to Padova, I found myself, I found myself in Padova. It was the first place that I came after I left my safe zone in Iran. -Roya

Roya's description of Padova as "my home" and the contrast between her current life and her past in Iran underscore migration's critical role as a space for renegotiating belonging and pursuing independence (Soong, 2015). Migration, in this context, becomes not just a movement across space, but a transformative journey.

I was so privileged to know like many people from different countries, different cultures, different backgrounds. And we always had big gatherings even though it was like a COVID quarantine era, but it still things are of course was in person mandatory and we had the permission to go. I mean we would have hanged out as well. So at least I met my Uni mates, and it helps me like integrate better. -Karen

And also... going outside this immigrant mind, like, okay, if you pretend you're from here, you can also make international friends, you can meet new cultures, you can meet Erasmus people, people who are doing their Erasmus who are coming from different countries. That was just so, so good. And I always thought it broaden your perspective of life, like that's why I said the whole

experience was good, because you get to experience things in a not isolated area and country which is very different. -Lelah

Similarly, Karen and Lelah's accounts highlights the importance of intercultural connections in facilitating integration and fostering a sense of belonging. He describes how his university community became a site of meaningful cross-cultural engagement. These relationships help foster familiarity and social capital (Faist, 2000), enabling smoother navigation through the challenges of resettlement.

The first year here was so stressful in terms of education, there were questions in my mind that, will I be able to pass all these exams? and do this project? And blah, blah, blah. So, it was so stressful. But from another point, I think I was at the peak of my life in the first year here because I don't know, I felt much closer to myself here, my personality and my values were appreciated here, in my group of friends. Because in my hometown in Iran, my personality was not appreciated because it was so restricted. I had to be, you know, how can I describe it to you? I had to be someone really strict, but here my joyful personality was appreciated, and I kind of was much closer to myself. That's how I found my real self in the first year from different perspectives, in my relationships, between my friends. -Clarissa

Clarissa's experience illustrates the psychosocial benefits of migration. Despite the challenges of the academic system and the uncertainty of the future, Clarissa frames her migration as a path to authenticity and self-discovery (Soong, 2015), where her joyful nature, previously constrained, found space to be embraced.

Uncertainty as emerged as a key word in the participants' accounts of their experiences, stimulating doubts over their choices.

Nothing in my resume like is bad except my GPA. I always think, I studied, it's not like I neglected anything, but would it be different if it was Italian? Or would it be different if I did my masters in my country? It would be, my GPA would be way better than this. Yeah, so, so I don't overall, I don't know if it was a good decision if I ruined my chances or not, maybe in a year if you ask me that the answer would be different. But now I'm just totally confused. What if I have to, you know, all of these questions. What if I have to go back? What if I can't renew my permit? What if I don't find the job anywhere else? -Lelah

Uncertainty is not only fostered in the minds and insecurities but is also a consequence of structural constraints and faulty bureaucratic processes that determine situations of fragility and precarity.

For example, the first year that I came here, there was a huge housing crisis, and nobody could find a house and their prices were going super high. And there was also a problem with the scholarships. And most of the Iranian students came here for the scholarship because they couldn't afford it by themselves. And then it was announced, okay, we don't have enough budget for half of you. So cool, like my personal life is hanging in the balance because like, I did not come here

a with a lot of money, let's say, so I was planning on getting the scholarship. Trying to learn the language, finding a job maybe later or trying to deal with everything. – Farhad

Such narratives underscore how bureaucratic and financial barriers exacerbate migrants' vulnerabilities.

On a different note, is Moe articulation of the effects of an uncertain future over the establishment of meaningful relationships. His reflection reveals how temporariness and transience, often embedded in international student mobility, produce a protective instinct that discourages deep relational investment.

I knew that I cannot make deep friendships with them, one, because they stay far away, two, because they are probably going away in two years. And then what would remain in the end was to keep in touch with the old friends, who I had in the bachelor. [...] It was not like I wasn't having fun when we went around, [...] but the one thing that for me was missing was the lack of bonds, lack of deep friendships and the lack of incentives to make the friendships, for them and also for me. And for me in the end it was like, okay, two years from now you're not here. So, we're going to have fun, we are going to have parties, we are going to dance but... Maybe it was some kind of fear? maybe it was some kind, I don't know. -Moe

3.2.7 Connecting through digital screens

While forming and developing new social relations and friendships in Italy, the participants experiences are also shaped by the physical distance from their loved ones. While more traditional migration theories proposed limited univocal trajectories from the participation in the life in the homeland towards the integration and commitment towards the host society, transnationalism highlights the practises of co-presence and mutual emotional engagement. In today's world this is possible through forms of digital connectivity, that allow transnational migrants to remain embedded in fabric of the family life as well as in the networks of friendships that span several countries (Gargano, 2009).

So, all of my friends in Iran, like let's say 90% of them also immigrated with me in other countries, not to Italy, like to US, to UK, to Belgium. So now I have two or three friends left there. Of course, I'm talking about my best friends, not like friends in general. But through social media I still have connection with the ones who are still in Iran and with the ones that are closer to me we do video calls, we chat, we are in each other's life. -Elaheh

I can say I have two close friends in Iran, one of them my professor, another one colleague of mine, she graduated from her master a year before I applied. Oh, I miss them to a great extent. I'm in touch with them. I write to them. I have video calls with them on a regular basis. -Farhad

I find ways to feel like I'm there, like in every birthday or every major thing, I just video call and they put me there like I'm there. I always pretend that I'm there, it feels like I'm there so it's okay. Like my mom went to a trip for four days and she wasn't home, and I would just ask my sister, videocall me, put me in the middle of the living room and I can just talk, not talk, I can just be there. We don't have to videocall for the sake of videocall, I just want to be present in the house. And they do that to feel connected. -Lelah

Through practices such as video calling the participants recount of rituals of togetherness that blur the lines between physical and digital spaces, shaping new modes of participation in the daily life. Digital spaces extend and reshape transnational social spaces, in what has been defined “digital transnationalism” by Starikov et al. (2018). The digital screens are not means to exchange simply communications, but especially emotional care practises, mutual involvement and support, like technologically advanced forms of social remittances (Levitt, 2001). This way the geographical distance is counterbalances by non-physical forms of belonging that inform the experience of transnational migrants, in a simultaneous connection and disconnection (Soong, 2015).

Other participants, however, acknowledge how these connections are not always easy. Despite the attempts, diverging life path, mentally draining circumstances, as well as infrastructural issues might pose limits to the frequency and intensity of digital connections:

Basically, every year that I go back, like more and more of my friends are leaving the country. So probably two or three friends are left there and that's also really hard. But with my family I, we mostly talk every night and the phone, video call but then their Internet connection is so bad. But we are close, and we basically talk every day, but with my friends mostly like our connection it's not like that anymore. We couldn't keep up like being in contact. [...] I mean it's a harsh environment and people are so fucked up so like I understand if they don't reach out or they cannot like afford mentally to like keep up with someone that is not there anymore. -Raha

So, we are pretty much scattered around the world. [...] So, we try to manage to keep in touch, send a message to each other every few weeks or so and that's it actually. So, we are not hanging, we are not sending messages to each other every day, but we kept that fire going. -Moe.

Ultimately, digital technologies emerge as critical tools in the emotional architecture of transnational life, enabling transnational students to negotiate belonging, proximity, and care across borders. While not a substitute for physical presence, these practices redefine what it means to “be there” for one’s family and friends. In the context of student migration, digital co-presence becomes a key element of survival, resilience, and continuity.

3.2.8 Mental health and the invisible struggles

While student migration is often framed through the lenses of opportunity, achievement, and advancement, participants' narratives shed light on its less visible psychological dimensions. The emotional weight of leaving a world behind, starting a new life by themselves, dealing with academic pressure, financial precarity, and the shift of cultural and societal contexts can accumulate, often beneath the surface of daily life, manifesting over time in the form of anxiety, fatigue, and distress.

After a year or so, things were not going very easily mentally, let's say. I had my dark moments too because now reality is hitting me, okay. Now I'm living away from every like every comfort and everything that I could live on. I still like this, I enjoy this very much, but okay, now what am I supposed to do? -Farhad

In my first year in June, I was afraid of losing my scholarship, because one of our professors was so strict. In the second semester one of our lessons had 12 grades, and we all we had already passed the first 6 grades in the first semester. So, if we couldn't pass the second one, the total 12 was going to not be considered. So, like at that moment I felt really anxious, like I also lost 10 kilos. It was really stressful that if I don't save my scholarship, I don't know, I will have to, you know, like financially would be really hard for me. So, I remember that like the June 2022 it was really stressful passing those exams. – Clarissa

For many international students, scholarships are not simply financial aid, but the very condition of mobility and survival. The threat of academic failure thus becomes a deeply existential burden, one that reshapes mental health, self-worth perceptions, and emotional stability. In this sense, as Soong (2015) notes, the academic performance is inseparable from broader emotional and structural dynamics.

I think like this, if I was born here, maybe everything was easier for me. But now, I'm starting for from zero, I'm learning Italian, I have many problems here, I should find a job. Because all of my Italian classmates now they have job, but I cannot find. Yes, sometimes I feel because I'm a foreigner here this problem happened to me. -Roya

Some participants also recounted the difficulty of mentally dealing with the world they left behind:

And it felt like my body, it healed in a way that now is feeling everything that happened to me. Like when I was during what was happening maybe in Iran, I couldn't really let my body or mind to feel that much because I had to survive. And now I came here and the first year I'm like, I healed at the certain amount of, I don't know, whatever, level. And then in the second year, probably in the half of it, my body started to feel everything that happened, and it was really intense. -Raha

Raha's reflection highlights how migration can provide space for post-traumatic processing. The distance from conditions that called for immediate survival enables the delayed emergence of unprocessed emotions, as a form of bodily reckoning with political and personal trauma. Here, the migrant body becomes a site where emotional histories resurface, a phenomenon highlighted by Khosravi (2010) in his exploration of the embeddedness of certain experiences of migration.

Okay, at least for me coming here wasn't really about the studying at first, it was about running away from my country. So, the first year at least, it was more like just like being so confused and not really thinking about what's going on. I mean, of course I had to go to classes, university and whatever, because my scholarship was dependent on passing certain amount of credits. But at least like the first month, it was really blurry for me. So, I was trying to just get over like a lot of traumas and like this stuff. -Raha

Together, these accounts call for a deeper understanding of student migration not just as a legal or academic journey, but as an emotional and existential process. Anxiety, trauma, alienation, and self-doubt are essential to understanding what it truly means to live as a transnational student today. Yet, they often go unacknowledged in institutional discourses, leaving students to carry these burdens alone, or to process them quietly, in the spaces between scholarship applications, exams, and bureaucratic appointments.

I would never, never be this enthusiastic about things that I am now. So, it's like when you don't have the worries, when you don't have that greyness over your face or your mind, you can appreciate things better. [...] I don't know it's like when you're in that situation you can't think straight, but when you are out of it, when you can think clearly, you'll see. Oh, I like the Persian New Year. Oh, I like this tradition. I like to read this thing. I like to talk about this thing. These are the things that I like. But when you are in there and everything is just so grey and so bad, you just want to survive. But when you're out of the survival mode, you can appreciate them. -Laleh

3.2.9 Recalibrating priorities

An important element that has emerged from the interviews is that academic life often remained in the background of participants' narratives. While university attendance and academic performance were part of their experience, these aspects occupied a relatively limited space in their stories. Instead, participants foregrounded the emotional, financial, and bureaucratic dimensions of their migration, indicating that the act of "studying" was

frequently overshadowed by the urgency of more immediate challenges. Transnational studenthood is experienced less as a linear educational journey and more as a complex process of adaptation and endurance (Soong, 2015)

For example, financial issues definitely affect people's mindset towards their experience. They're like, if they don't have enough money, they cannot live as well as they can or they cannot study as much as they must because like if you have to get a part time job, you don't have enough money. You don't have enough time to dedicate to your studies. Or if you're always stressed about getting a scholarship or like getting money from your parents, because that can also be a challenge. For example, 2-3 months before I received my scholarship, I had the time, I had the energy, but I couldn't dedicate enough of that to my studies because my mind was so preoccupied with different ideas, different struggles, different challenges that I had to go through -Farhad

Tasks like housing, immigration paperwork, and navigating unfamiliar systems consume time and mental energy. This way, education becomes entangled with migration work, and students must distribute their resources accordingly.

And the Uni was nice just itself, but the living part in the city for the first month was bothering me till I find the house because I couldn't really even concentrate in the Uni if I knew that I don't have anywhere to live. So, it was like a big important like problem in my brain. I was like I'm going to be homeless in one month. And I remember I found the house that I moved in now and I stayed till now in the last four years and a half the last day that my guest lodge would be finished. So, I found it in like 4 pm and the next morning at 10 am I moved into that house. -Karen

Uh, absolutely university of Padova is better than there because it's very big, the rank is so better than my previous university but studying there for me was easier because I didn't have any problem, I was just studying. And also, I was studying in Persian, my mother tongue, so it was easier. But here I had many problems, many basic problems that I should solve. And then, I mean, in Iran I had everything and my focus was only on studying, but here, no, I should do many stuffs like getting permesso and also finding house and I have to do everything by my own. -Roya

From these accounts emerges that studying becomes secondary to the resolution and management of a series of challenges and duties that precondition the continuation of the mobility. A whole series of practical and bureaucratic matters takes precedence, creating a very difficult experience to navigate, especially considered the facts that academic results are often the prerequisites to be able to maintain a certain financial stability. It's like a loop of demands placed upon the students, often aggravated by lack of institutional support.

Being a transnational student today means dealing with a complex interlacement of new opportunities, personal growth and development, and a whole series of practical, emotional and systemic challenges.

3.3 What does it mean to be an Iranian transnational student today?

3.3.1 Leaving Iran

The marginality of the academic dimensions resurfaces when the participants consistently highlight that their decision to leave was driven not solely by educational aspirations but by the desire to access freedoms and opportunities unavailable in their home country. While formally enrolled as international students, the interviewees frequently framed their relocation as an act of personal and political departure, rather than one of purely educational pursuit.

When I was thinking about leaving, these things were annoying, but I was also seeing that the dollar with respect to Iran's currency, rial, was tripling every year and I was thinking, okay, I stay here, I cannot do anything in my life. So, I started my master and then one day I just opened this telegram account, it was saying that this University of Padova it's offering this kind of scholarship, and I was like, okay, so I applied for it. -Moe

There are bigger reasons we did that, not just... when you come from Iran, you just don't come to study. You can do that in Iran too. You come for things you can't have in your home country, and they were more important. I always said, okay, I'm having a hard time in university, but at least I can choose what to wear, at least I have that. Even small simple things like I have the ability to order something from Amazon, that's just so simple. Now I have this power to choose if I want something, if I want to buy something, I don't have to go through someone who lives outside Iran, who can buy it, who can send it for me. I can just directly do that. Or I can open my laptop, turn on my laptop, go to WhatsApp and use it immediately without turning on VPNs. That's just things that are very simple, but to this day I still sometimes can't believe I can do them. -Lelah

Lelah explicitly expresses the search for freedom that informed her decision. While educational attainment is a valued goal, it is the newfound ability to engage in simple, autonomous acts, such as shopping online or communicating without digital barrier, that symbolize a profound sense of liberation. Even when facing difficulties in the academic sphere, these newly found freedoms offer a baseline of dignity and self-determination.

I arrived and like the first thing I realised was the air because in my hometown it's a bit polluted. I know that Padova it's a big industrial city and compared to other cities maybe it's a bit more polluted. But for me it was the opposite. And like, I felt the air and I, I, I had a really nice feeling also, like, you know, it was like my life in Iran was a bit restricted because of the society and the culture and the family standards. So, like the first night I was out till late, and for me it was something really new. And I had my, you know, young nightlife for the first days, not like going to clubs or getting drunk, just being out, you know, just being out late at night and nobody is, you know, worried about me. -Roya

Roya's sensory experiences evokes a visceral sense of release, an embodied contrast between past restrictions and a newfound sense of independence and liberation. These are not simply students travelling and attending foreign universities, these are actors reclaiming their right to self-agency and mental serenity. Their migration signifies more than physical relocation; it becomes an act of resistance against systemic constraints:

So, I started studying and at the same time I started working. And when I started working, I realised that the problem is not on the surface. The problem is not the government telling people to wear this or eat this or do this. The problem is more systematic and deeper inside people. I was working and I think I was good at what I did, and I had responsibilities. But I was the only woman, and every time I wanted to talk, no one would listen unless I was angry. I had the responsibility, but I didn't have the authority. [...] My manager would have the audacity to sit and mock me in front of everyone, and I knew it was just because I was a girl. So, I thought, this is not okay, I'm happy, okay, I have my family, but this is not where I want to live. -Lelah

In the following extracts Moe and Farhad articulate a pervasive sense of emotional numbness, a psychological response developed over time as a mechanism to cope with a series of draining conditions while still living in Iran. Moe describes a buildup of "micro stresses" embedded in the everyday, such as the constant anticipation of punitive consequences, that gradually become so normalized they fade from conscious awareness. Farhad echoes this affective detachment, referring to a period of emotional suppression shaped by the unfolding of hurtful events. For both, migration marks the beginning of an unfreezing process, a tentative reengagement with their own emotional landscapes.

When I was uh leaving Iran, I was bugged by a lot of these issues, and when I came here, I cannot maybe describe everything perfectly, but just the amount of stress that was released from me. I understood that it's just better for you. All these micro stresses that you go through throughout the days of like. I don't know, when you go out you don't have to wear some specific stuff, for women, also for men, for women worse, in some places you shouldn't wear jeans and stuff like that, you know? There you are just ready that something happens. [...] But then like after two months, three months of living like that, you get numb, you don't feel it anymore. [...] The issue is that you... the big problem is that really you get numb to them. -Moe

These were bizarre things that were happening, and reality was not pleasant, and I knew I was not happy with the situation, but I couldn't do much. Mostly I'm numb emotionally because of personal reasons, I was numb at least, now I'm exploring different sides of my myself and different emotional aspects of me are getting developed and are allowed to present themselves. But yeah, back in there, there's always emotional numbness. -Farhad

These students' lives unfold within transnational social fields, through which travel ideas, emotions, and practices, shaping a web of connections that stretches from their home country to multiple other localities (Glick Shiller et al., 1992). Within this dynamic landscape, they emerge not merely as students, but as agents of political and societal transformation, whose

everyday actions and embodied experiences contribute to the reconfiguration of both origin and destination contexts (Boccagni et al., 2015).

3.3.2 Homeland connections

The participants' narratives reveal a broad spectrum of relationships towards the "homeland", ranging from critical detachment to grief-stricken guilt. While participants share a common point of origin, their sense of belonging and their attachment to Iran is refracted through culture, political displacement, personal transformation, and diasporic distance.

For some, like Karen, migration has resulted in a profound rupture:

Everything has changed that I don't feel even the nostalgia to be like, okay, it feels like my childhood, and I want to go and explore it. It's of course a new thing and I would want to go and visit later just for the sake of travelling, but not for going and to live because I don't think in that society I would be able to live. Even other people [...] I don't think they can really see my new version now in person living there, that would let me live that freely as of my own. Because for them I'm breaking all of the taboos possible. So, I don't think it's gonna be that easy for me to live next to them and I have zero desires to do that. -Karen

His narrative reflects a deep sense of estrangement, not only from the places but from the social norms that define them. Migrating gave him the possibility to express himself freely, but this new self breaks "all of the taboos possible" and thus no longer fits within the boundaries of the society he left behind.

Others, like Farhad, express a selective attachment, one grounded in cultural or regional heritage rather than national identity:

I could connect to my Shirazi roots, not whole general idea of being an Iranian. I cannot connect to the idea of being a Persian because... I can relate to Persian poetry, Persian culture and a lot of other Persian things. And I'm from the state of Persia, state of Farsi in Iran, so where the base of the Persian Empire was and everything. So, I can relate to that idea better that I can relate to this idea of being an Iranian, whatever that means, I don't know. -Farhad

While he distances himself from the political and social meanings associated with the idea of being Iranian, Farhad maintains a sense of belonging through the cultural legacy of Persian civilization, particularly its poetry, historical symbolism, and regional affiliations. By privileging his Shirazi roots and cultural affiliations over national identity, Farhad resists this territorialized logic, opting instead for a non-state-centric, civilizational sense of self,

where his sense of belonging is configured through symbolic geographies rather than the formal boundaries of the nation-state (Glick Shiller et al., 1992).

In contrast, Lelah speaks to the psychological need to maintain cultural practices as a form of diasporic continuity and emotional coping:

But with the culture, I try to keep things alive as much as I can. Especially because if I don't, I would feel even worse, like if it's Persian New Year and I do a minimal thing I would start overthinking and thinking about how I wanted to be there. So, I always do this big thing to not be able to think, but also to prove that I'm not disconnected, to myself at least. Like I know the traditions, I'm keeping them alive, I'm treating other people to the Persian meal, which is my favourite thing to do, and I even didn't know that was my favourite thing to do. -Lelah

For Lelah, engaging with cultural rituals such as celebrating Nowruz and preparing traditional meals becomes a ritualized form of remembrance and connection, functioning as an anchor in the face of displacement and nostalgia. These practices serve not only to affirm a sense of belonging to a shared past and collective memory but also to counteract feelings of homesickness and separation that often accompany migration.

Instead, Raha account highlight a connection to Iran, expressed by many of the participants, marked by mourning and guilt:

It's really hard, because at the end you belong there. There's nothing that... I'm never going to feel home again and that's my home and I feel guilty for living my people and not standing with them and not fighting with them every day. And the last days was really hard. It was just me being in the streets and looking at every person and crying and saying I'm sorry that I'm leaving you alone in this. And I have this guilt everyday basically. -Raha

Her voice captures the emotional cost of migration, where physical distance from home is accompanied by a persistent sense of moral failure and grief. Her sense of belonging is still radicated in the world she left behind, and her narrative centers on an affective dissonance, a psychic and emotional split between the freedom gained through emigration and the feeling of having deserted a collective struggle.

Scholars like Clifford (1994) and Cohen (2008) have emphasized that diasporas are not merely defined by physical displacement, but by complex relationships to origin, belonging, and identity. Diasporic attachments to the homeland are not static or homogeneous; rather, they are shaped by time, personal transformation, and sociopolitical rupture.

3.3.3 Political participation

As the conclusive part of each interview, I changed the registry and asked one more specific question, to focus on the dimension of political engagement, both when the participants were still living in Iran and since they moved to Italy. Considering that most participants migrated around the period of the protests sparked by the killing of Mahsa Amini, catalysts for the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, as discussed in Chapter Two, and that many were very young during earlier political events, their accounts of political participation are confined to these specific historical events.

I tried to be as engaged as I could in socials, like in social media. I knew it wasn't enough. But in my situation, I, I tried to do as much as I can everywhere I can. And I remember it was this night in one of the universities in Tehran and they were surrounding the students who were protesting with guns, and they were, I think, surrounding them in the parking lot, I don't remember. And they were arresting them and beating them and everything and I begged my dad to go because they said if enough people, enough cars are there, that would help the situation. And they went. So, like there was this other night that they set fire to this political prison, and I did the same, I tried to go, my brother also went to the protests, and I think for a month every night I cried for them to let me go, but they didn't. -Laleh

I wish I could be one of them, but I was never even like the most crazy thing that I did in my life was to immigrate, and I'm too attached to my parents. And if they don't let me and if it breaks their heart to do a thing like, at this point, I don't care that much about my life. If I'm gonna get shot in the street or if I going to end up in a prison, I don't really care. Maybe I care, but not that much. I care more about my parents to live a life with like a gone child or a child in prison. [...] And now that I'm here, whenever it was like a protest going on here, I was there and I was posting everything, like trying my best. Specifically, when I was here, I had friends here, I had international community, my social media. So, I tried my best to like, publish whatever I could to educate people about what's happening there because now I had the freedom to do it. -Elaheh

Both Laleh and Elaheh articulate a fierce internal drive toward political participation, not just symbolic, but embodied and potentially dangerous. Their words evoke a readiness for risk, a desire to stand in solidarity with those protesting in the streets in Iran. Yet, they refrain from physical action due to the family intervention, and they choose to protect their parents from potential grief and trauma. Their imagined confrontation with death or imprisonment is not avoided for personal trepidation but rather processed through relational ethics: a refusal to cause suffering to their loved ones.

There is also a temporal shift in their activism. While denied full participation within Iran, they channel their energy into transnational forms of advocacy once abroad, through protests and digital activism, helping to internationalise national issues (Starikov, 2018).

After migrating to Italy, the participants' political engagement took on a more overt, public and institutionally legitimised shape.

During the Mahsa Amini protests we were always outside yes, in Padova, I was also in Milano because there was a big protest there. The girls cut our hair, and we posted everything in the social media. I remember that I was also in the video that it was taken of girls cutting their hairs, I had to go back to Iran in that, and I was really afraid that's all they're gonna cuff me in the airport because of social media. And I also had posted lots of things during that time. [...] It's so sad, you know, like sometimes I feel guilty that I'm here and I'm not in my country, especially in the Mahsa Amini demonstrations, there was a guilt, I think it was in most of the people living abroad that if you want to do something, you should go back and do take actions in your country. But I think it was also a nice action here, because people living abroad maybe they are helping others to know that what's going on in Iran. -Clarissa

These forms of participation are lived in a dual way. On the one hand, engaging in digital activism and taking part in the protests emerge as an almost natural extension of their moral and political alignment. For many, these actions represent the least they can do, a baseline expression of solidarity with those resisting inside Iran. On the other hand, these practices are also perceived as insufficient, even hollow in comparison to the embodied risks taken by protesters within the borders of the Iranian state. Thus, participation abroad is shadowed by a sense of deferred responsibility, as if the real revolution, the real sacrifice, is always happening elsewhere.

While participation abroad may carry a symbolic weight, it is not free from consequences and from the spectre of state surveillance.

Since I moved here, the Mahsa Amini protests, I was active as well. Even the first protest in Padova, I got the permission from the comune of Padova and Carabinieri by my own name and under my Italian ID. And I remember later there was an unknown caller called me later on, which was from the Iranian embassy threatening me, if you do it another time, we are gonna like find you or let cause harm to you. And I didn't really listen. I took the second one, the third one, most of them, even if you go to comune and check, they are under my name, my God, I was the leader of the protest in Padova, and in Venice and in Rome. And I went, I participated, I even went to the biggest protest of Iranians in Berlin. -Karen

Karen's testimony is notable for its defiance. His choice to take on a leadership role in the organisation of the protests, even in the face of direct intimidation from the Iranian authorities, suggests the extent to which he is willing to risk for the sake of the cause, leveraging the legal protections and visibility afforded by his new national context. He embodies an activism that arises precisely because migration opens new political possibilities (Boccagni et al., 2015).

In contrast, Roya's testimony reveals a sense of fear and uncertainty that tempers political engagement. Her concerns about possible retaliation through bureaucratic harassment, such as interference with her documents or difficulties returning to Iran, highlight the enduring reach of the Iranian state's surveillance and control, even beyond its borders.

I don't know how it works, okay, I have like some fear maybe about this doing this stuff. And I don't know who it will be because I, uh, because when you go to Iranian embassy also here, if they knew that you do some stuff, maybe they will bother you with your document and with, with this stuff. Or maybe when you want to come back to Iran, it will bother you because it's not like freedom. And yeah, you cannot do anything. -Roya

As mentioned previously, the proliferation of digital communication technologies and the dynamics of capitalism enabled the creation of a transnational frame of reference for this diasporic generation, facilitating the construction of multiple and overlapping forms of belonging that move beyond the binarism of home and host country. Nonetheless, these accounts reveal that the profound interest in the restoration of freedom and prosperity in Iranian society, as well as the social mobilisation that characterised the first waves of diasporic migration, has not waned over time. These students are creating transnational social spaces where political engagement is not merely an activity, but a constant backdrop to their lives. Although it comes at a great cost, these accounts demonstrate the strength and resilience in defending the right to freedom and to a dignified life, in any way possible.

Conclusions

This study aimed to explore the migration experience of the Iranian students who moved to Padova to attend the University. Based on the transnational theoretical framework, the research considered the entire process of mobility, from the moment the participants decided to undertake this journey, taking into account the sociopolitical background of their lives in Iran, to their settlement in Italy and the establishment of a new life. Adopting a qualitative approach, the study consisted of a series of dialogical interviews, to give space to the participants' voices to build their narrative and to observe which themes and categories emerged as predominant. While most of the literature has examined the institutional and economic dimension of international student mobility, analysing enrollment policies and market trends, this thesis focused on more situated elements, exploring the participants' everyday life, their social networks and their emotional and political practices. Often considered as merely conducting an educational journey, here the transnational students are viewed as social actors that navigate multilayered transnational social fields, maintaining connections beyond national contexts, contributing to the exchange and the movement of financial, material and social remittances. Drawing from Soong's (2015) work, the interviews attempted to bring into emergence the emotional and psychological levels of the participants' experiences, to analyse the complexity of an experience of cultural hybridity, transformation and emotional labour

The interviews reveal that, while the academic dimension is technically the reason and the fixed centre of their experience, in the participants' narratives, the aspects purely related to their educational journey remain in the background. Of great importance appear to be the problematic encounters with the institutional and bureaucratic system, which inform their student habitus (Tran, 2016). These encounters create a series of conditions that hinder and often constrict their experiences, forcing them to confront systematic inequality and discrimination and to find alternative solutions to challenges they should not have faced. Academic achievements are both the prerequisites and the consequence of the broader structural elements that shape their mobility, in a loop of expectations and faulty bureaucracy that creates a very stressful experience, shaped by uncertainty and precarity. The participants highlighted how, often, the multiple challenges and practical issues, such as securing a house, obtaining a residence permit, and opening a bank account, drained their mental and physical

energy, as well as limiting their time resources, resulting in the inability to attend fully to their academic duties. Another recurrent theme in the participants' accounts is the fragmented nature of the social context and the separation between locals and internationals inside the university premises, resulting in the hardship of creating meaningful connections with the Italian students.

On the other hand, from the interviews emerged a shared happiness and gratitude related to the lives the participants established in Italy and the new opportunities that have come with it. These encompass a broad range of lived experiences: a newfound freedom that inspired transformative processes of self-discovery and self-expression; intercultural networks of relations that broadened their cultural and social imaginaries; a supportive community that helped them through the most vulnerable moments of their journey; the possibility to engage in political practices towards their homeland without risking their life. The latter is a very significant element in the transnational experience of Iranian students. The country's current situation is the basis of the migration for many participants, and the diasporic dimension emerges in their efforts to participate in any possible way to support their country against the dictatorial, oppressive regime. In this context emerges how the transnational social fields are today extended by the new digital spaces, where the participants report to engage in political activities and digital activism, as well as in practices of co-presence and virtual connectivity with their geographically distant loved ones, creating new ways of belonging and involvement.

Although the present study had only the objective of shedding light on an overlooked dimension of international student mobility, it has highlighted the necessity to further research the situated and individual practices of students' migration and to include them in the broader discussions on transnational trajectories. Comparative studies across different national and institutional contexts could enrich our understanding of how students navigate localised systems while inhabiting broader transnational social fields, how they negotiate their sense of belonging and how they engage with the political landscape of the various contexts, especially under rising global precarity and authoritarianism.

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